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A Full-Length Novel

OLD TEXAS DAYS . . . . . **Larry A. Harris** 10
Tex Delaney and his Mexican partner Chili head for the Brasada to turn their guns against the evil betrayers of the range where Tex was born

Two Complete Novelets

THE GHOSTS OF BUCKSKIN RUN . . . . **Jim Mayo** 90
Everybody had Rod Morgan tagged as a killer—but he stubbornly refused to clear out of the canyon country until he proved his worth to a girl

THE BLIZZARD AND THE BANKER . **Joseph Chadwick** 132
It was a strange combination, a dignified banker and a hardcase outlaw, that bucked the odds against a mean blizzard to feed the starving town

Five Short Stories

THE BARGAIN . . . . . **A. Leslie** 8
A slick Americano pulls a slicker deal in Soldado below the Rio Grande

LONE HAND LAW . . . . . **William L. Hopson** 83
Sheriff Harrigan knew the right time to let a prisoner make his escape

THE RAIN GOD'S GOLD . . . . **Gladwell Richardson** 114
Booker had a case of outlaw trouble—but there was a certain cure for it

COLTS FOR A KID . . . . . **Ben Frank** 125
Eddie wasn't a big kid, but the hate in him made up for his short size

THE GENERAL'S GUN . . . . . **David Lavender** 150
Old Handlebar Hank's hired hands were in a dither when he went courtin'

Features

THE BEST OF THE WEST . . . . . **An Editorial** 6

WESTERN NUGGETS . . . . . **Harold Helfer** 39

LADY RUSTLER (Verse) . . . . . **Pecos Pete** 139

MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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THE BEST OF THE WEST...

ONCE again the editor of this anthology is happy to bring to you what he believes are some of the finest Western tales we've published in the past. And writtn by some of our finest authors.

The romance and fascination of the Old West never dies. Renewed interest in it grows stronger the farther it fades into the panorama of history. The glamour of its action-packed drama makes up a good part of our American heritage. After all, the building of the West constitutes most of our American history—for originally the West was practically all land beyond the Alleghanies.

Fictionally speaking, the West is a bearded Mountain Man who fought or frolicked with equal pleasure and was the original rugged individualist. . . . It's wagon trains crawling across dust-laden plains, constantly on the alert for hostile Indians . . . the bawling of longhorn cattle trailing to railhead, herded by the most romantic character to come out of fact or fiction — the American cowboy. . . . It's mile-high mining towns and men who murdered for gold . . . hard-bitten outlaws who rode the owl-hoot trail and harder lawmen who tracked them down . . . and lonely army posts where a soldier's life lasted just as long as he could keep his scalp intact. . . It's Forty-niners who, severing all ties with their homes in the East, took off into the setting sun, believing that in the West they would find their destiny.

This, and more, makes up the West we offer you in fiction — and we hope you enjoy to the utmost this anthology we had much pleasure in preparing.

So, the Best of the West, to you.

—The Editor

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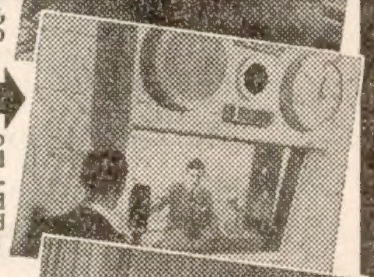

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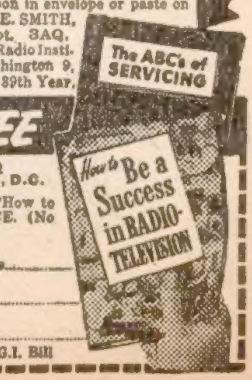

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A slick Americano pulls a slicker deal in Soldado below the Border

THE BARGAIN

By A. LESLIE

THE LITTLE Mexican town of Soldado was in an uproar. Yells, squalls, the crackle of six-guns and the thunder of hoofs soared up to the stars. Through the crooked streets raced lean, masked riders, shooting and whooping. Peons scuttled for cover. Shopkeepers cowered behind counters. From the presidio, set on a low hill, shrieked a fanfare of bugle calls: Don Pancho Garcia's "soldiers" were mounting in hot haste.

They did not mount fast enough, however. Before they swept down the hill, the shadowy raiders were thundering toward the American Border. With them thundered the corralful of fine saddle horses Don Pancho had intended to ship south within the week—including Niña, the beautiful sorrel mare that was his pride.

"Maldito!" raved Don Pancho, waving pudgy hands, his fierce mustaches bristling. "A raid from the North! My horses stolen! *Caramba,* such things are not done! And my beautiful Niña! Five hundred pesos in gold will I give for her return—along with the man who took her, dead or alive!"

In the Bar-C ranch house, across the Border, there was joy. Old Man Clancy chuckled until his sides ached. Young Chuck Howard, his foreman, grinned as he stroked the sleek neck of the sorrel. "Is there hell down there!" he chortled. "I betcha Don Pancho is standin' on his ear! That old hellion's been raidin' across the Border for years, wide-loopin' hosses and dogies. Wonder how he feels to get a dose of his own medicine handed him? . . . All right, Hartsook, you and John and Ben get this herd movin' north. Turn 'em over to Wolfe and get a receipt. . . . The mare? I'm keeping her."

"That's dangerous, Chuck," protested Clancy. "She'll be recognized."

Howard nodded, but said no more. It was in Chuck's fertile brain that the idea of the raid had formed. Clancy figured that Chuck had whatever he wanted coming to him. But Chuck was, himself, on the point of regretting keeping the mare. It was dangerous.

Hassayampa Hawkins rode up from Mexico the following day. "Hell's boilin' down there," he told Chuck, and showed him a crudely printed copy of Don Pancho's reward notice. Chuck read it and grinned, his gray eyes narrowing.

LATE that afternoon a tall, bronzed American gained audience with Don Pancho. "You have them pesos handy here in your office," he told Don Pancho. "I'll bring in your hoss—and the man what widelooped her!"

"Cospita!" exulted Don Pancho. "Eet ees the bargain!"

Just at dusk, two days later, the tall American again rode into Soldado. Beside him cantered a riderless horse. The sentry at Don Pancho's door gave one look at the beautiful mare and shouted for Don Pancho. The old bandit leader, now the smug mayor of Soldado, hurried out.

"Come een, señor," he invited. "The pesos await you. Eet ees the bargain!"

With fat hands he counted out the gold pieces, a soldier standing guard beside the desk. He dropped them in a sack and started to shove it across the desk. "But wait, señor," he exclaimed. "The bargain was that the man you should breeng also. You have heem, *sí?*"

The tall American surged forward, tore the bag of money from Don Pancho's hand and thrust it into his pocket. Don Pancho screamed a curse. The soldier lunged wickedly with his bayonet. The American cowboy moved aside and cracked him over the head with the barrel of his Colt. He shot a gun from Don Pancho's hand and leaped for the door, just as the sentry barged in.

The sentry tried to use his rifle, but the cowboy gripped him by the arms and hurled him through the window.

Don Pancho Garcia wrung his bleeding fingers and bawled curses. In his ears rang the words Chuck Howard had hurled at him the instant before swift hoofs had raced away to the North: "Bargain was kept, Don Pancho. I brought in your mare—and the man. I'm the hombre what lifted your hoss!"

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OLD TEXAS

She struck at the man who grabbed her

DAYS

A Novel by LARRY A. HARRIS

Tex Delaney and his Mexican pard Chili head for the Brasada to turn their guns against the betrayers of the rangeland

Copyright, 1945, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in May, 1945, West

FALL rains had set in, shrouding the Ohio River country in mist and fog and hinting of an early winter. On elm, maple and oak trees that timbered the rolling hills and gullies were leaves of gold and brown and brilliant red that would flutter to the ground before the first snow.

Near the broad river, Fayette Prison stood like an ancient fortress, a grim reminder to river-boat men who passed it of the horrors of the Civil War. For inside Fayette Prison

were gaunt, bitter-eyed men in the drab gray of the Confederacy who had fought with Lee through to Amelia Court House on the Danville Railroad, when Sheridan's horde had captured them. But even with capture they had refused to acknowledge the gall of defeat.

As night spread its mantle of gloom the barred windows of the prison glowed with yellow light. At the front gate a slicker-clad Union trooper paced back and forth, a rifle on his shoulder, his bearded face wet with rain. Inside a gong rang, signifying that mess was over. Booted feet beat a dull rhythm as grim prisoners returned to their cells.

In solitary, Breck Delaney, more familiarly known as Tex, waited until the guards passed, then stepped to the single barred window. For a week now those guards had watched Tex Delaney closely. Just seven days ago his cellmate, Chili Cortina, had escaped—going over the wall in a hail of lead.

The prison guards had not watched Chili Cortina as closely as they might have done. Apparently they didn't think the meek, flea-bitten little Mexican had it in him to escape. That mistaken judgment on the part of the guards was in Chili's favor. Since then Tex Delaney had been grilled the rough way. They figured Delaney knew which way Chili would flee. But they hadn't figured a man could be as tough as Tex Delaney.

Two nights ago, Delaney had faced the men who were determined to make him talk, his bleeding lips pulled back in a mirthless grin, a tall, wide-shouldered Texan with cold blue eyes. Prison hell and the grueling ravages of war made him look older than his twenty-six years. His curly brown hair was shaggy, his face bearded. He stood well over six feet and had the big-knuckled fists of a fighter.

"Chili," he told the prison officials, "is long gone. It'll take more than you and your bloodhounds ever to get him back. If I knew exactly where he was I'd let you kill me before I told you. Now crack your whip, and let's get this confab over with."

THEY cracked their whips, all right. But before they subdued Tex Delaney and threw him into solitary he knocked three of the burly guards cold.

Now Delaney peered out into the rainy black night. Across the river, the hilltop that held his interest took dim shape against the storm-tossed night. If things went right Chili Cortina would be up there some time between now and dawn. He would light a fire that would be the signal.

Thunder began rumbling, the surrounding hills tossing back the echoes. Then lightning followed, splitting the inky heavens in blinding flashes of light, revealing the wind-bent trees in their silvery splendor.

From his pants pocket, Delaney pulled out a frayed letter. He knew almost every word in it by heart. A month ago one of the guards told Delaney that a letter had come to the prison addressed to him. And Delaney had bribed the guard to get it for him, with the only thing of value he possessed—a turquoise ring that his mother had bought shortly before she died.

By the flashes of lightning, Delaney's eyes again scanned the feminine scrawl that said:

Dear Tex,

You may be surprised when you get this, but I was just as surprised when I learned that you were still alive. There is a Captain Lew Strang, a Yankee soldier stationed here with a company of troopers. Just by chance I happened to mention your name to him, and he knew who you were. He said you and some other of General Lee's men had been imprisoned after the war for acts of treason. That is all I could learn from him.

We all thought you were dead, Tex. I do hope you get this letter. I've told

no one what Captain Strang told me, for it may not be true. But if you get a chance, write to me, and if there is anything I can do to help I'll do it.

Texas is changed since the war. The ranchers are no longer shipping their cattle, for their markets are glutted. Cattle are dying by the thousands, and are being skinned for their hides. Rustlers and killers are getting rich stealing the hides of other men's beef, and the law and soldiers can do nothing about it.

A Frenchman from New Orleans has come into Mustang Valley and bought all the land he can lay a hand on. His name is Lamont, and nobody trusts him. There is so much bloodshed and trouble. Your father is old and needs help. Why don't you write him? I know you and he didn't get along, but he is still your father.

Love,
Starr

Delaney shoved the letter back into his pocket, a tight, queer feeling in his

TEX DELANEY

throat. At best it was a puzzling letter. Impetuous, flashing-eyed Starr Hoskins had promised to marry Tex Delaney five years ago. Her letter had come to Delaney like a ghostly voice out of the past, haunting him with memories.

He started, heart hammering against his ribs. High on the hill across the river blinked the tiny light of a campfire. Gladness poured through Delaney. Hope beat wildly through him in a cross-current of emotions.

"Chili," he whispered. "Good boy!"

He turned from the window, strode to the barred door, trying desperately to bridle the clamoring excitement inside him. For this moment he had waited and dared, suffered and worked with all the tedious patience a man can know.

The guard was at the far end of the gloomy corridor, back turned in sober contemplation as he gazed out the open door at the storm-swept courtyard. Delaney whirled, sprang to his bunk. Cold sweat beaded his face as he crawled beneath it and began removing one of the large flat-faced stones.

Night after night Delaney had worked there, picking the mortar loose, crumbling it and tossing it out the window. A knife he had managed to steal from the kitchen was his only tool. Luck had sided him so far. After removing the huge wall stone he had found the outer stone mortar sodden and wet from the moist earth of the prison yard. However, once free from his cell he still had the open yard and the eight-foot wall to dare.

Cautiously he inched the first stone from its lodging place, shoved it back into one corner of his cell out of sight. Footsteps sounded in the corridor. Quickly Delaney flopped on his bunk, closing his eyes. With breath tight-held, he heard the guard pause at his door, peer in. A lantern in the man's hand pushed back the gray shadows of the cell. Then, apparently satisfied, he grunted and went on.

THAT was the guard's last cursory inspection for the night, Delaney knew. Swiftly he crawled back to the aperture in the wall and began jabbing at the mortar with the dull blade. The roar of the storm deadened the slight sounds he made.

For an hour or more he kept at it, pushing, prying, until the outer stone came loose. The muscles in his neck and broad back bulged as he shoved. The hammering pulses in his temples were like pile-driver blows as he felt the rain and mud on his hands. Chill night air, damp and clammy, gushed in through the hole.

For seconds he lay there, thankfulness and hope tingling through every fiber of his being, measuring his chances. One wrong move now meant death. Tense, he listened. No alien sound stabbed at his nerves. He grinned coldly.

"Good luck, Tex," he murmured.

He poked his head into the hole, then his shoulders, pushing with his toes. It was a tight squeeze for a man of his size, but inch by inch he wedged himself through. Cold rain beat down on his exposed head and shoulders. Jagged lightning crashed through the murky heavens, and in that instantaneous glare Delaney spotted the guard at the front gate.

He caught his breath, flattened, nerves keyed to explosive pitch. When the shout of discovery came, he lifted his head, peered through the black downpour toward the prison wall, a hundred yards away. Beyond that lay the brush-tangled thickets and the river. Freedom!

Delaney crouched, all flame and ice. Then, bent low, he made his bid, covering the ground in long strides. Each second he expected the crash of a rifle, the sickening smash of a bullet in his back. He felt the rain in his face, the sting of it on his sweat-plastered body. Then like a bounding cougar he hit the wall in one leap, finding a slippery hold for his fingers, straddling it as he had once straddled wild broncs when a kid.

A rifle roared somewhere behind him as he leaped into the brush on the other side. In mid-air a hot poker seemed to touch his left arm above the elbow. He stumbled, breath gusting from his lungs. Above the bedlam of the storm rose the yells of the prison guards in the yard behind. A bell began clanging, adding to the tumult.

Delaney came to his feet running, crashing through the brush toward the river, one hundred and eighty pounds of unleashed brawn and muscle. Deeper into the labyrinth of rain-lashed gullies he plunged, guided by occasional flashes of lightning. Back of him sounds of the aroused prison dimmed. But in another hour the dreaded bloodhounds would be on his trail.

Twice in that run for freedom, Delaney paused, making certain of his directions. Breath tore from his lungs in great sobs. Fierce elation shook him as he went on, feeling his way through knee-deep mud until he came to the bank of the thundering river.

And there at the designated cove, he burst through the willows to see a dim shape rise up in the night before him. A rain-drenched bareheaded little man leaped from the bow of a small flat-bottomed scow, his croaking cry of joy slicing through the storm.

"Tex! *Que hubo, compadre!* You made eet!"

He fairly pounced on Delaney, wringing his hand and jabbering excitedly. The loyalty and courage of this little Mexican hellion touched Delaney.

"We'll have to hurry, Chili!" he panted.

"*Andale* she ees, Tex!"

They climbed quickly into the scow and shoved off, each man with a single oar. The breast of the raging flood caught them, swirled them away from the brush-fringed shore and downstream. As they passed within rifle shot of the prison they heard the baying of the hounds, the clang of the bell, and the faint shouts of men—sounds muted by the crash and roar of the storm.

Then they rounded a bend in the river and Delaney breathed easier. The burning sensation of his arm wound gave way to molten streams of pain that gripped his entire body. He gritted his teeth against the nausea. He felt the warm blood drop from his finger tips.

AT DAWN, shivering, wet and miserable, they pulled into a brushy covert. Here, miles below the prison, Delaney explained they would wait the day through and go on again at nightfall. Only then did Chili notice

the blood on Delaney's hand. Concern leaped into his bloodshot eyes.

"*Por Dios,* Tex! You are shot!"

Delaney forced a grin he didn't feel. "We've both been shot before, Chili," he gritted. "It's just a flesh wound. Help me tear off my shirt-tail and make a poultice of mud."

As the little Mexican scrambled around to help, he kept up a running fire of talk. It was all a strange and bewildering land to him.

Chili was a bedraggled figure. His long black hair was plastered with rain. Both he and Delaney were still wearing the tattered gray uniform of the Confederacy. Delaney asked him where he had been since escaping. Chili chuckled and explained that he had hidden in the woods for days, playing hide-and-seek with the bloodhounds. Farther upstream he had found the scow. Tonight he had crossed the river to the hilltop, found some dry sticks and started the fire.

"Now where do we goes from here, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Home, Chili," Delaney said grimly. "Back to the Brasada. There's hell going on in Texas—and I aim to have a hand in it."

"Weeth Mexico ees thees trouble, Tex?"

"I don't know," Delaney said honestly.

Chili glanced down at his shapeless muddy boots.

"Whatever ees the trouble, Tex," he murmured, "I'm steeking weeth you."

Delaney nodded. "That's the way I want it, Chili."

II

DELANEY and Chili hauled their scow up to the brush and crawled beneath it while the storm raged on. After a time Chili slept from utter exhaustion. But Delaney lay awake, tortured with bitter memories and the fiery pain of his wound.

It wasn't like Starr Hoskins to write a letter like the one she had sent. Something was wrong in Mustang Valley in Texas. Desperately wrong. That much Delaney could tell by reading between the lines. And it puzzled him.

Starr had always been more like a pard to him than a sweetheart. Bronze-haired and lovely, she had grown up conscious of her charms, and knew how to use them. Coquettish and daring, she had always been a source of worry to her mild-mannered father, and the center of gossip for the few straight-laced old ladies in Mosquero town.

Until the Civil War things had gone fairly well in that far-flung frontier between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande. Bitterness in the minds of the Border people over the Mexican War was dying. It was still disputed land—that wild, sparsely settled stretch of mesquite between the two rivers, despite the Hidalgo Treaty which conceded the land to Texas.

Mustang Valley was not far from the Border. Here intrepid Texans had settled, braving the dangers of Kickapoos and Comanches, renegade Mexicans and roving American brigands. Here they built their homes and ranches, grimly accepting the challenge of the frontier—honest, God-fearing men who had fought and suffered that bloody red dawn at San Jacinto.

Frank Delaney, Tex's father, was a big, stern-visaged man of few words. What he did or said was law among the other scattered ranchers. Tex's mother had died when he was born, and Frank Delaney cursed the fate that had deprived him of her. There was never that intimacy and understanding between father and son that there should have been.

Everybody expected Tex and Starr Hoskins to be married. Fine pair, folks said. Only Starr was too wild and uppity for a gent like Tex Delaney. She preferred frilly dresses to the calico most women wore.

"Starr is a good girl, Tex," Bowie Hoskins, her father, had told Delaney. "I mean that, even if she is my daugh-

ter. She's just like a colt that needs taming, and you're the one that can do it. I'm just hoping, son, that the day will come when you two young 'uns will get hitched. My Leaning H and your pa's Horseshoe spread would be one then."

Bowie Hoskins had been deadly serious. But the next day when Tex had mentioned it to Starr she laughed lightly.

When?"

"Mañana."

Tex had grinned boyishly. "In Mexican that means the tomorrow that never comes, Starr."

"Well, maybe that's the way our marriage will be," she teased.

"Maybe so."

"But I do like you, Tex."

"Reckon that goes double, sorrel-top," he had said, and grinned.

After that, Tex heard the rumblings of war—the Civil War. Gossip, rumors, swept the far-flung borders of the Brasada like wildfire. Texas, a new state in the Union, flamed with indignation and swung to the Confederacy.

Tex's patriotic fervor had become aroused. When he'd told his father his plans, the oldster's face had hardened.

"I forbid you to go, son!" he rapped.

Rebellion had flared in Tex. "I'm going, anyhow, Dad," he said tightly. "I feel it's my duty."

Rage had shaken Frank Delaney. "Duty!" he'd echoed fiercely. "Your duty is here helping on the ranch, Tex! Mustang Valley is the place for you—not hundreds of miles away from here fighting somebody else's battles. If you want to fight, organize some boys here and clean out Cortina's raiding band of Mexicans across the river. They've always been a thorn in our side. And will continue to be till they're wiped out."

TEX DELANEY had known that nothing he could say would change his father. Tex had been twenty-one, and with a mind of his own. It had not been the first time he and his father had disagreed.

When Tex pulled out that night, Frank Delaney had stood in the doorway, face working with suppressed rage.

That had been the last time Delaney had seen his father. Neither had written during the intervening years. In Mosquero town, Tex met three other youths who were answering the call. Among them was Chili Cortina. Chili had been born and reared on the north side of the Rio Grande. His mother was Irish, his father Spanish. He was Tex's own age, a meek-appearing but fiery young gent who could cuss in two languages.

Embittered because gringo settlers had laid claim to an old Cortina land grant, Chili's father had moved to the south side of the Rio Grande years before. Raids and rustling had been laid to Señor Cortina. Rumor had it that he had political ambitions to claim all the Brasada and rule it in the name of Mexico.

But Chili had none of his sire's aspirations. As youths, he and Tex Delaney had hunted together. Chili was proud of his Texas heritage. When Delaney told him he was going to war, Chili hadn't known what it was all about. But the devil himself couldn't have kept him from going along.

Starr Hoskins had met Tex in town that night. She'd kissed him and done her best to keep from crying.

"I know there's nothing I can say that will make you change your mind, Tex. All I can do is to wish you luck. If—when you come back, I'll marry you. That is, if you still like me."

"I'll always like you, sorrel-top," Tex had said.

He and Chili and the other recruits had ridden out of town that night into a bloody conflict that had lasted four years for them. They had starved and marched through swamps and rain, through sweltering heat and hail. And at no time had they heard a word from Mustang Valley.

Wounded and half dead from exposure, Tex and Chili had been cap-

tured. As belligerent prisoners they had been brought before a Captain Strang, a Union officer. Captain Strang had been responsible for them being sent to the prison in Kentucky, where they had been forgotten.

Delaney finally closed his eyes on his thoughts. But nightmares plagued him and he rolled and tossed. Feverish and sick, he woke with a start. Above the sound of the rain pattering on the boat came the distant baying of hounds. Then Chili was awake, his eyes glowing with apprehension.

"Let's go, Chili," Delaney said grimly.

They scrambled out from beneath the scow, shoved it into the water and leaped in.

For hours they hovered near the shoreline, keeping the scow pointed downstream. The rain turned into a drizzle that fell ceaselessly from a leaden sky. At times the angry, muddy waves lapped over the bow of the small scow, and both men had to bail with their cupped hands. And floating trees and debris swirling along on the breast of the flood were a constant menace.

Drenched and miserable, both men fought to keep afloat. Delaney's left arm began swelling. Fever mounted in his veins until every movement was agony, but he said nothing. Each mile the tide carried them onward was just that much closer to home. Getting back to Texas was all that mattered.

Delaney was positive that the Captain Strang mentioned by Starr in her letter was the same Union officer who had sent him and Chili to prison. Delaney and Chili should have been released like the other prisoners of war. But the enmity between Delaney and Captain Strang at first sight had been one of those clashing emotions which are intuitively recognized by men of opposite natures. And Captain Strang, a hater of all Rebels, had had the upper hand.

Now as night came on, Delaney and Chili made camp in another thicket along the river bank. They drank brackish water to quench their thirst, chewed the juice from wild grapes that Chili found. That night Delaney became delirious; he raved and cursed while Chili worked over him.

FOR three days Delaney had little recollection of what happened. There were long black spells when he knew nothing. Then would come moments of semi-lucidity when Chili was rebandaging his arm, forcing him to drink hot liquid from a tin cup. But on the fifth day he woke to find his mind clear. He was sunken-eyed and shaky, but his fever was gone. The swelling was out of his arm.

Chili had rigged up a lean-to. There was a small fire burning close by, and enough food and extra clothing in the makeshift camp to supply both men. Chili had on new overalls, and a belt about his waist held a sheathed knife.

"How you feels, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Fine," Delaney said weakly.

"Then we best be on the goes, Tex. Some man are lookeeng *por* us."

"Prison guards?"

Chili grinned, shaking his head. "The man wheech own thees store I breaks into *por* these supplies. He ees wan mad rooster, p'raps."

Without asking, Delaney knew that some time during the past five days Chili had sneaked into a settlement. During the war Chili had learned the art of foraging.

That day they continued floating down the river. Once they saw a river boat and pulled into shore while it passed. The rain had ceased. That night a moon topped the wooded hills.

Several days later they passed Memphis. While the moonlit nights held they went on, sleeping by day. They passed log cabin settlements, heard the chant of Negro roustabouts along loading wharves where huge river boats were being loaded. When their supplies ran low, Delaney rationed them.

"We'll do on what we got till we get to New Orleans," he told Chili. "When

we get there we'll try to work our passage on a Gulf steamer bound for Galveston."

Delaney was positive that the law would be on the look-out for them. Word had likely spread of their escape. And New Orleans, policed by Union troopers, would have the description of the two fugitives.

They passed Vicksburg in the dead of night. The river grew broader with each passing day. Steamers, their decks loaded high with cotton and other cargo, became more numerous, and Delaney became more cautious. When they finally neared New Orleans, they left their scow on the outskirts, waded bayous and timbered swamps into the city.

Darkness was in their favor. Down the dimly lighted, narrow cobbled streets they made their way through the busy throng, past thriving fish markets and stores, beneath long balconies where French girls leaned over the iron rails, jabbering and calling to the passersby below. Guitars tinkled and voices lifted in song. The shouts of vendors and the clatter of horse-drawn traffic added to the hubbub.

The seething turmoil touched Delaney's nerves, bringing unrest. He avoided the lighted blots along the thoroughfare, cursing the fate that had made him an outcast. All the old bitterness and hate surged anew in him whenever he and Chili passed within arm's reach of a Union soldier.

Straight for the waterfront Delaney headed. There, near the docks, a lighted store front caught his eyes. He stopped, gripping Chili's arm. Over the door of the building was an illuminated sign that read:

PIERRE LAMONT
Importer
Beef — Hides — Tallow

Delaney stepped into a doorway.

"My guess is that's the Lamont that Starr mentioned, Chili—the Frenchman with holdings in Mustang Valley back home. He's dealing in the hides of Texas cattle."

Chili shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*"

A plan flashed into Delaney's mind. Here was chance likely for a passage to Texas. And a chance to learn more about this Lamont. At the docks lay two steamers, with roustabouts swarming up and down the gangplanks, carting huge bales of cowhides into a warehouse. Above the clamor of frogs and rattle of traffic came the hiss of escaping steam, the shouts of a steamer captain from the pilot-house.

OUT of the gloom came deck-hands, firemen and engineers, their profane shouts all but lost in the confusion. Straight for the nearest saloon they headed. As they passed, Delaney started. He had recognized one of the men among them!

"Stoker!" he called guardedly.

One of the noisy men halted as the rest went on. He peered into the dark doorway. Then his face lighted.

"Tex Delaney!" he bellowed. "Chili Cortina. Damn me—"

"Careful, Stoker," Delaney warned. "The law wants us."

The law? And who, me fine Texas bucko, is the law in this land but the men who are big enough to make it? I wouldn't be believing me own eyes if I couldn't feel ye. Peeked and gant as scarecrows, both of ye, but filled with fight or my name ain't Stoker McGinnis. Tell me—"

"Where we can be alone, Stoker."

Stoker was overjoyed. He knew a back-alley saloon and led them to it. In a rear room alone, they drank beer and talked for an hour. Stoker was a brawny giant with a round, red face and a voice like a fog-horn. He would go out of his way to get into a fight.

When the Civil War broke out he had been in New Orleans. He had joined the Confederate forces. If he had been in the North at the time he probably would have joined the Union forces.

In the running battle of Shiloh, Delaney, Chili and Stoker McGinnis had been thrown together. Once Delaney had saved Stoker's life, and the big

Delaney's gun leaped into his fist, menacing the beef-skinners

Irishman had never forgotten it. But afterward, they had become separated.

"Heard ye and Chili were dead, Tex," he explained.

Briefly, Delaney told him all that had happened. When he asked about Lamont, Stoker wagged his head.

"Don't know much about him, Tex, even if I do work for him, sculling his smelling hides out of Texas. Never even seen him. As a fireman on the *Lucy May*, plying between here and Rockport on the coast of Texas, I get my pay, work like sin and hear nothing."

That was about all Stoker McGinnis had to offer, except to say that Pierre Lamont had some tough men working for him, running his exporting office and commanding his boats. Rumor had it that Lamont was aristocratic French, shrewd in business, and merciless with his competitors.

"Why was ye wondering about him, Tex?" Stoker asked.

"Curiosity as much as anything, Stoker. Maybe that, maybe more. Now what are the chances of us stowing away on your boat when she leaves?"

"I'll fix it for ye gladly, Tex," Stoker said eagerly.

They made their plans quickly. The *Lucy May* pulled out tomorrow night, plying back to Rockport for another load of hides, Stoker revealed. It would be an easy matter for him to hide Tex and Chili. Until then he knew a cheap lodging house where they could stay. He insisted on Delaney accepting some money.

Outside, they headed back toward the waterfront. As they drew near Lamont's store a buggy whirled past,

drawn by a fine team of bay mares. Delaney caught a glimpse of a girl driving, just as a man lurched out in the pathway of the horses. Too late the girl tried to stop. The man cursed, leaped back, grabbing the horses' reins and jerking them to a standstill.

"I'll learn you to run a man down!" howled the bull-necked, bearded sailor. "Women the likes of you with your high-faluting finery need putting in your place!"

He lunged toward the carriage as if to yank the girl to the ground. She came to her feet, whip lifted, her face white as death. She struck the man as he grabbed her. As she fell to the cobblestones and the team bolted, Delaney plunged to her side.

III

RAGE, swift and almost blinding, leaped up in Delaney. He didn't hear Stoker's warning shout. The bearded man near the prostrate girl whirled, snarling.

"Keep out of this, damn you!" he roared thickly.

His hand was stabbing for a knife when Delaney's big-knucked fist caught him between the eyes. The blow whirled the man,, sent him sprawling into the gutter. Then other men were running toward the scene from all directions. A police whistle blew. Two blue-uniformed troopers came charging around a corner of the dock.

"Run, Tex!" Chili shrieked. "Run for eet!"

In one strong, swift movement, Delaney gathered the unconscious girl up into his arms. Down the street he bolted, whirling into a dark alley to shake pursuit. Back of him shadows churned, a pistol blared, and men yelled. Another black lane opened to his right and he took it, praying his luck would hold.

It led into a street dotted with lights, busy with traffic. With pursuit still dogging him, Delaney broke through the teeming flow of traffic, ducked into another lane and circled a dark building to the front again. A huge, heavy door beckoned. It gave to his shoulder. He stepped inside, closing the door at his back, breathing hard.

"You are in trouble, my son?" a voice said gently.

Delaney whirled, the unconscious girl in his arms. He saw a kindly-faced, robed priest coming toward him, saw rows of seats, the tapers burning on the altar.

"Yes, Father," he murmured, and quickly related what had happened.

"Come," said the holy man.

He led Delaney through the dimly lighted church into a rear room. When candles were lighted Delaney glanced down at the girl. Her eyes were open now, but they were dark pools in her dead-white face. There was a bruised spot on her forehead, from her fall to the cobbles.

"You can let me down now," she said. "I'm all right."

Delaney felt the blood rush to his face as he released her.

"You had some trouble," he said awkwardly. "I fetched you here."

She sank into a chair. "I gathered that from what you told Father Poiret a while ago. I was conscious then."

She drank the glass of water the priest offered her, speaking to him fluently in French. He answered her in the same language, smiled, and waddled out of the room. The girl looked up at Delaney, studying his bearded, bitter face with honest candor. A faint smile touched her lips.

"You are not a common ruffian," she said.

"Guess again," Delaney said grimly.

"You intrigue me, *m'sieu.*"

"Whatever that means."

A sparkle came into her dark eyes. "Your drawl hints of Texas."

"That's my home."

"Señor Texas," she murmured.

"It just happens to be Tex—Tex Delaney. I answer to that more than to Breck Delaney."

Delaney felt strangely ill at ease. He had never seen a girl just like the

one seated before him now. Her cool, unruffled poise, her piquant speech, with the faintest accent, marked her of the aristocracy. It spoke of breeding and elegance that lifted her far above the common level. She was beautiful, as a China doll is beautiful —and as frail. Yet her lithe body indicated strength and courage and pride.

The candlelight gleamed in her black hair. Her ruffled dress with the full skirt, and the lacy white collar so trimly about her slender neck hinted of wealth. Delaney found himself comparing her to hoydenish Starr Hoskins. And something stirred inside him.

She rose and moved up to him. In any other girl it might have appeared unduly bold, but with her it was an entirely natural move.

"Your eyes give you away, Señor Texas," she said softly. "There's bitterness and hate in them that a woman can read. You have probably just come out of the war. You probably hate me and my kind of people, for while you starved and suffered we managed to have plenty. You saved my life tonight, and for that I want to thank you."

"Forget it."

SHE shook her head. "No, I never shall. I sent Father Poiret to get word to my father not to worry about me. Father Poiret christened me when I was a child. You are perfectly safe here, but if you wish to leave—"

"I'd better go," Delaney cut in.

He started to the door, turned. The girl was staring at him, the full flame of her emotions an open book for him to read, her lips parted with unspoken words. Slowly she moved toward him and he stepped forward, drinking in her wistful beauty. Neither of them could have told what was happening. Some strange magnetic force, greater than either of their wills, was drawing them together.

"You'll be going back to Texas, I suppose," she said softly. "Some day, perhaps, we may meet again. My hand is promised to a man in Texas, and some day my father will take me to him." Her eyes were haunted with shadows, but she was smiling. "Good-by, Señor Texas."

Delaney ignored her outstretched hand. Hungrily he reached for her, trembling in every muscle, thrilling to the warmth of her lips against his own. The warm, sweet scent of her hair was like heady wine in his nostrils. He was blind to everything but her loveliness.

When he released her, she drew back, pale and trembling. There was no fear in her wide eyes; only startled uncertainty.

She breathed, "Why did we do that?"

"I don't even know your name," he said huskily.

"Jean Lamont," she murmured.

"You mean—"

"Pierre Lamont is my father," she said tremulously. "You have heard of him?"

"He owns land in Mustang Valley, in Texas. That's my home."

She caught her breath. "Then you must know M'sieu Jacques Chaffee, who manages the ranch there. He is the man I am to marry."

"No, I don't know him. He and your father came into Mustang Valley after I left. "I've been gone from there five years."

"War?"

Delaney nodded, his brain rioting with emotions.

"Good-by, Jean," he said queerly.

And with no other word he left her, gently closing the door at his back. He walked through the church and outside like a man suddenly jolted back to unpleasant realities. He tried to concentrate on finding Chili and Stoker McGinnis, but it was hard.

On purely a hunch, he returned to the back alley bar where Stoker had taken them for their conference. There he found Chili waiting for him. Chili was overjoyed. He had tried to follow Delaney after the street fight,

but had become lost. He didn't know what had happened to Stoker.

"Stoker is all man and can take care of himself, Chili," Delaney told him. "We're not waiting until tomorrow night to go back to Texas by boat. We're striking out pronto. Come on!"

On the outskirts of New Orleans, Delaney and Chili slept the remainder of the night in a barn. At dawn they were up, heading westward on the bayou road around the Gulf. Luck played into their hands when some high-wheeled freight wagons overtook them. Delaney braced the wagon-train boss for a job. After some parley he and Chili were signed on as gun guards.

San Antonio was their destination. After two weeks of man-killing labor and hardship, struggling across swollen streams, they made it. From a pock-marked barkeep in the old Buckhorn Bar, Delaney learned what Starr Hoskins had meant when she had written that Texas had changed.

"I'll tell a man Texas ain't what she was once," the barkeep barked. "You're Texas. I can tell by your talk. Where you been since the damn Yanks and carpet-baggers and tinhorns taken over this country? In jail?"

"You guessed it, mister!" Delaney said wryly.

"Up North?"

Delaney nodded.

"Where's your home?"

"Brasada."

THE pock-marked barkeep up and shrugged. "Well, if that's where you're heading you're asking for trouble in big lumps, pardner. Nope, you don't need to worry about the law nabbing you—that is, if they're trailing you. This is Texas and they ain't no law here but six-shooter law. These are rocky times. Rocky times. Cows ain't worth nothing but what you can get for their hides and taller, because they're so ganted from running wild all over the state, and money ain't worth the paper it's printed on.

"There ain't no more shipping, because cows got to be rounded up and fattened before they'll bring anything. With cowmen it's everybody for hisself and the devil take the rump end. Down in the Brasada cows are drifting by the thousands and dying like flies. The Skinning War is on. Anybody can claim the hide of a fallen cow, regardless of the brand. Rustlers are getting rich. And that damned Juan Cortina and his Mexicans are raiding from across the river."

That barkeep's news was not the cheerful variety for a man on his way home after five years.

With the money that Stoker had thrust on him, Delaney took a whirl at monte. He won enough of a stake to buy two horses, gear, and a six-shooter for himself and for Chili Cortina. That evening they headed south.

Besides the campfire that night, Chili was quieter than usual. His bloodshot eyes were brooding. When Delaney tried to cheer him he wagged his head dolefully.

"I keep theenking my father, Tex —the raids—"

"So far his raids are only hearsay, Chili. And if Juan Cortina *is* making 'em, it's not going to come between you and me. Nobody could hold you for what your father might do."

They went on the next day, farther to the southward. They crossed the San Saba and the Llano, the Frio and the muddy Nueces. Then in front of them lay the Brasada—that wild, tumbled land of mesquite and cholla, live-oak mottes and Spanish dagger. A land beckoning of danger; lawless, renegade-infested and untamed. A disputed land, rich with promise for those with the brawn and courage to claim it.

Home! Delaney thrilled to the smell of the brush, the feel of the thorns against his legs. Yet a psychic sense of danger, a gnawing uneasiness rode his nerves. That feeling grew as they went on.

Still a day's ride from Mustang Valley they made camp. A bitter cold norther sprang up, spitting a little snow. And in his blanket that night, Delaney heard the rumble of hoofs, the smash of brush that told him of wild cattle and mustangs drifting ever southward toward a milder clime.

Next day Delaney set a hard pace, avoiding the few scattered ranch houses. Night caught him and Chili on a high rim overlooking Mustang Valley. That same uncanny dread sawed at his nerves. A whisper of evil seemed to ride the bitter cold wind. Below them the valley lay like a black pool, sinister and foreboding. Distant specks of light told of life.

Delaney dipped his horse down the brushy slope, with Chili at his heels. Halfway down they stopped. Both men had their six-shooters palmed. Neither could have explained the strange spell that gripped them. Whisperings came up from the black valley—the pound of hoofs, the creak of gear.

Delaney waited, then went on, riding slowly, eyes stabbing the gloom. He felt his flesh crawl as a nauseous odor filled his nostrils. He knew that terrible stench, the dread of all cowmen. At the toe of the hill he dismounted, stalked through the brush into a clearing. And there he stopped, staring at the ghastly sight before him.

Everywhere lay the skinned carcasses of cattle. Buzzards screamed at the disturbance, flew noisily away from their gluttonous feast. The ground was littered as far as the eye could see.

WITH a bitter pang, Delaney returned to his horse. He led the way across the valley in silence, gloomed by the prospects that faced him. At last dismal lamplight from the front windows of the Horseshoe ranch house shone across the range. The barn and outbuildings, the pole corrals and windmill, unpainted and badly in need of repair, took shape in the night.

Delaney and Chili wheeled up in the yard. A buckboard and team stood near the front door. They dismounted, and Chili took the reins of both horses.

"I'll wait een thees shed, Tex," he said softly.

Delaney knew how the Mexican felt. He nodded, strode swiftly toward the gallery. Poignant memories smashed at him as he opened the door and stepped into the front room. A lamp burned on a table in the center of the room. Logs flamed and crackled in the huge rock fireplace. There was the same horsehair furniture, the same faded pictures upon the log walls. Nothing seemed changed.

In the palpitating silence, Tex called, "Dad?"

There was no answer. In long strides, he crossed the room to a gloomy corridor that led to his father's room. A tall, stringy-necked man with bug eyes and a bald head suddenly blocked his way. Delaney recognized the man as Doc Tidwell, of Mosquero.

"Where's Dad, Doc?" Delaney snapped.

The tall medico stared, visibly shocked. Tex had always liked this kindly old doctor who had been a good friend of his father's.

"Tex!" Doc Tidwell exclaimed. "Where did you come from? I thought you were dead."

Delaney didn't take time to explain. That could wait. He asked again for his father, and the doctor's face twisted with sympathy.

"Your pa is dead, Tex," he murmured gently.

Shock tore through young Delaney. Not the blinding grief he might have felt, but a terrible hurt. Even though he and his father had not seen things in the same light, Tex had loved his father, had respected him, and had hoped that after his long absence everything could be different. And now it was too late!

The hurt caused a tightening under his heart and blurred his vision.

IV

IN THE doorway of his father's room Tex Delaney paused, a hard lump rising up in his throat. Frank Delaney lay on his bed, a blanket covering his body. Dismal lamplight cast shadows across the stern features that were white in death. His right hand lay across his chest, the fingers clutching an old tintype.

Hat in hand, young Delaney knelt at the bedside, his spurs jingling. He didn't turn as the old medico moved up beside him. Eyes filled with mist, Tex saw that the picture was one that had been taken in Mosquero years ago. It was the faded picture of a tousel-haired, barefoot boy in overalls.

"The last thing he asked for was your picture," Doc Tidwell said gloomily.

After a time Delaney said, "When did he die, Doc?"

"About two hours ago."

"What was the matter with him?"

Doc Tidwell said slowly, "He was murdered, Tex."

Delaney got to his feet. Steely fingers seemed to be plucking at his heart. He saw the haunted look of fear in the medico's bulging eyes—the same look that was in the eyes of other men on this stricken range, something he did not know, as yet. And rage, deeper than grief, ripped through Tex Delaney.

"Who did it, Doc?" he gritted hoarsely.

"I don't know, Tex," Doc Tidwell moaned. "Don't know!"

All he knew, he explained, was that he had driven out here about an hour ago, from town. He often visited Frank Delaney of nights. When he had driven up in the yard he found the oldster lying on the gallery in a pool of blood. Doc Tidwell had carried the dying man inside, had done all possible to save him, but it had been useless.

"All your pa could say was that a man rode up just at dark. When Frank went out to meet him the man fired from the dark and spurred off."

Delaney barely heard the rest of the feeble explanation. Doc Tidwell was frightened. So many killings had taken place lately, he said tremulously. No one could be trusted. He said he would spread the word of what had happened here.

Pill bag in hand, he went out to his buckboard, climbed in and drove away as fast as his horses would carry him.

Delaney went back to his father's bedside. There he knelt again, his gaunt face hard, eyes bitter.

"Good hunting, Dad," he said huskily. "I take the blame for us not getting along better, but I'll make up for it somehow. This is my home and I aim to keep it as such—come what may. I'll find the snake that killed you and square with him if it's the last thing I ever do!"

He rose, covering his dead sire's face with the blanket. When he turned he saw Chili standing in the doorway, his eyes shadowed with kindred emotions. Chili had sneaked in through the kitchen door. He had heard all Doc Tidwell had said.

"I'd like to stay here weeth you awhile, Tex," he said queerly.

"You're welcome, Chili. You may be letting yourself in for a heap of trouble, but make yourself at home."

Delaney went to the kitchen, lighted a lantern. He went out in the front yard, began pacing up and down in the darkness, studying the ground. In the fringe of gnarled mesquite trees he suddenly stopped. A horse's hoofs had dug into the turf. Close by a shiny object caught his eye.

Quickly he stooped, picked it up. It was an empty brass cartridge—a .45.

When Chili joined him he said grimly, "The bushwhacker made no effort to hide his sign, Chili. Here's the empty shell."

The little Mexican said nothing. But Delaney knew their thoughts were the same. Army men were issued this old type of cartridge for their Colts.

Brushpoppers and ranchers, as a rule, carried .41s and .44s.

Finally Chili said, "You theenk—"

"This Captain Strang gent that Starr mentioned needs some investigating, Chili. Maybe I'm barking up the wrong tree, maybe he ain't the same Captain Strang that you and I been up against. But there's something almighty funny about this. Keep a tight lip and say nothing to anybody."

THEY returned to the house. While Chili was making coffee on the kitchen stove, several neighboring ranchers rode up. Already Doc Tidwell had spread the word of Frank Delaney's murder, and also had told of young Delaney's return.

The ranchers tramped up on the gallery, a gun-heeled, grim-faced lot —cowmen of the old school. Men who had heard the deathless cry of the Alamo, brush-scarred and tough as the gnarled oaks that dotted their ranch lands, but kindly. Men bewildered, puzzled, plagued by the riotous killings and bloodshed about them, and looking to someone else to lead them, now that big Frank Delaney was dead. Men with the haunted look of disaster in their eyes.

Among them were DeWitt Edgerton and Mossy Cooper, Sandy McPherson, Long John Pike and Lane Newberry. Strapping men as much alike, in build and manners, as was the leather in the center-fire saddles they rode. They wore long leather leggins, scarred boots, big hats and thick woolen shirts. Brushpoppers!

And with them was Starr's father, Bowie Hoskins, with a sheriff's star pinned to his shirt front.

Their greetings were the same, the simple greetings of strong men of the frontier. Their hand clasps were firm.

"Howdy, Tex. Glad you're back."

They saw in Tex Delaney not the grinning, devil-may-care kid who had run off to war five years ago, but a powerfully built, wide-shouldered man whose passions had been tempered, whose eyes spoke eloquently of suffering and hate—a man with all the qualities of leadership that his father had possessed.

They offered no profuse sympathy, for which Delaney was glad.

Morosely, Mossy Cooper of the Bridle Bit outfit, said, "We was mighty glad to hear you're still alive, Tex. Our hope is that you'll go ahead with the Horseshoe and make it the spread your pa had hopes of it being. There's trouble ahead of us, but if we stick together there's hopes of us pulling out."

The friendship and loyalty of these men stirred something inside of Tex Delaney that was almost dead. When he saw a chance he took Bowie Hoskins out to the barn where they could be alone. A hundred questions beat at Tex.

"Now tell me, Bowie," he said, "about Starr. Is she—"

"Whoa up, son. Let's start at the first. Where's Chili Cortina?"

"Back at the house. Why?"

"Did he come back with you?"

"Yes."

"Do you figure you can trust him?"

Delaney's eyes slitted. "I don't know what you're drivin' at, Bowie. But I do know that I can trust Chili with my life."

Bowie Hoskins's actions puzzled him. Of all the men in the valley, this

seamy-faced, tobacco-chewing oldster had been closer to him than any of them.

Bowie, owner of a shirt-tail cow outfit near Mosquero, was the sole living parent of a large brood of children. His wife had died eight years ago of pneumonia, leaving him with more than he could do. Much of the work had fallen to Starr, who had rebelled at such drudgery. Reared in such poverty, it was only natural that she should have longed for the nicer things of life.

Bowie hitched up his sagging guns, ill at ease. He looked at Delaney, his eyes those of a doomed man.

"Tex," he began, "don't get riled at anything I say. Before I explain a thing I wish you'd tell me about yourself."

Delaney told him in as few words as possible all that had happened since the night he had ridden out of Mosquero to join General Lee's forces.

"You got Starr's letter?" Bowie asked.

"You know about her writing?"

BOWIE nodded. "She told me about it, but begged me not to tell nobody. There's hell loose in the valley, son. That's why I asked you about Chili. I never held anything agin him, but his bean-eating old man is on the rampage. He hides out in a little settlement across the river with as back-stabbing a bunch of cutthroats as the Border ever spawned.

"Then there's Lamont and his gun-toting crew to contend with. He's a French furriner, Tex—a big gent with as smooth a line of talk as ever you heard. His foreman is just the opposite—squatty, and dangerous as a coiled rattler. During the war, Lamont sneaked in here and bought up all the east end of the valley for a song. He's got power and money behind him, boats plying the Gulf, holdings in New Orleans, and a freight line in the making between here and Rockport

"If I'm any reader of sign, Tex, this Lamont is scheming to own the whole damned valley, and is playing a waiting game to get it. You'll *sabe* what I mean when you been here a month. There's been a drought here the past year. Cattle are dying by the thousands. And them that's alive are drifting fast."

Bowie talked on, his voice low and tense. He told Tex how the ranchers were killing cattle for their hides and tallow. Beef itself was being fed to the buzzards. In Rockport hides were worth seven dollars apiece. Anybody could skin a fallen cow. There was no law. Nothing he, as sheriff, could do could stop the bushwhackings and raids.

In order to survive, the Mustang Valley ranchers had formed a pool. Despite the feeling against Pierre Lamont, he had joined. Shrewdly, tactfully, he was trying to work himself into the good graces of the smaller ranchers. Lamont owned a hide and tallow factory in Rockport. He was one of the biggest buyers of hides in Texas. Much of the time Lamont was gone from the ranch, leaving full charge to his foreman, Jacques Chaffee.

"And the Union troopers?" Delaney asked. "What are they doing here?"

Bowie snorted disgustedly. "The Government sent a company of Yanks down to police the Border, Tex. Sent 'em down here to keep Injuns, Mexicans and renegades off our necks. And all they're doing is raising ruckuses theirselves. Texas is a mighty big state. If it's to be tamed it's up to us folks who live here to do it."

Delaney's mind whirled. He knew Bowie was holding something from him.

"What about this Captain Strang, Bowie?"

Bowie Hoskins looked away. "I hate him, Tex."

"Would *he* have any reason for killing Dad?"

Bowie started. "None that I can think of, Tex. Though Strang is rotten plumb through. But I so happen to know that when his Army hitch is

up he aims to go into the ranching business. Why?"

"I was just wondering about him," Delaney said grimly.

"You're safe down here in Texas, son. If the Yanks want you they'll play hob getting you. It's a different brand of law down here. I'll work with you all I can to find out who killed your pa."

"You haven't mentioned Starr, Bowie. How is she?"

Bowie's shoulders sagged as if all the life's blood were draining out of his body.

"Don't hold it agin her, Tex. Maybe I'm to blame in not bein' the father to her I should have been. She—"

"Tell me!" Delaney snapped.

"When word reached us that you was dead Starr run off and got married, son."

"Who to?"

"Captain Strang!"

For a long moment Delaney stood stunned. Then, without a word, and, torn with the agony of memories and the bitter future ahead, he returned to the house. He could feel only pity for the forlorn old lawman. It had been a terrible blow to Bowie—Starr's marrying a worthless Yankee Army captain.

Some of the ranchers stayed the night through. Others rode back to their spreads, promising to return the next day. Tex Delaney went to the back room that had been his. He and Chili slept until shortly after dawn, then faced the grim chore that confronted them.

DELANEY found it hard to plan. He thought of Lamont—and of Jean, whom he had kissed that night in the church. With a start he suddenly realized that her image had been with him constantly. He thought of what Bowie had told him of Juan Cortina, Chili's father, who was raiding in the valley. And Captain Strang, Starr's husband. He kept the empty cartridge in his pocket and showed it to no one.

That afternoon, under leaden skies, they buried Frank Delaney on the knoll beside the grave of Delaney's mother. Practically every rancher in the valley was present. Lamont and his tough crew, Delaney noted, were absent. Nor was Starr there. Sheriff Bowie Hoskins came alone, his shoulders bent with tragedy.

It was a simple ceremony, conducted by the long-legged sky pilot from Mosquero. His words sounded strained and inadequate as he quoted Scripture. Men and women stood with bowed heads, and the frightened kids stared as the first clod of dirt was tossed in upon the pine-box coffin.

" 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,' " the parson intoned. " 'Blessed be the name of the Lord.' "

There were no tears; no eulogies. Death had struck once more in Mustang Valley. It would strike again. Grim-faced men led their toil-bent wives and children back to the buckboards in the yard. Rocky times in Texas. Rocky times.

That night a skift of snow fell, whirling out of the north on a roaring, icy cold wind. Delaney and Chili were up early, eating from the scant supplies in the kitchen. Try as he would Delaney couldn't shake off the depression that gripped him. In hard toil he hoped to find solace—and his own salvation. He had dedicated his life to finding the murderer of his father. That, and holding on to the ranch, was all that mattered to him.

All that day he and Chili bucked the blistering gale, doing a job that was like gall and wormwood to them both. In ravines and timbered slots they found Horseshoe cattle where they had been trampled, or frozen to death. Chili, an expert with the knife, did most of the skinning.

Toward noon, Sheriff Hoskins and Long John Pike rode up where they were working.

"I know you don't like doing this, Tex," Pike muttered. "But it's the only chance we got of pulling through the winter. Maybe beef prices will go

up by next spring. Maybe we can fatten up enough cows to ship again."

"This ain't the cow business," Delaney remarked acridly. "It's worse than a slaughter-house chore. I hate it!"

"It's our only chance," Pike repeated sadly.

Delaney knew that. And for that reason alone he went ahead with the unpleasant task. According to Bowie last night, Delaney knew his father had left no money. Nothing. Only the ranch and the few Horseshoe cattle that hadn't drifted.

V

CHILI helped Delaney string the hides up in the barn to dry. From the other Mustang Valley ranchers Delaney learned how to cure them, tie them in huge bales. Day in, day out, they worked from daylight until dark, but at no time did Delaney find surcease from his thoughts.

He found carcasses where someone else had already stripped the hides from his cattle. He found sign where many of his longhorns had either drifted or had been driven away.

A gloomy hush settled over Mustang Valley. Bowie reported no raids, no bushwhackings. But it was like the tense, danger-fraught hush that precedes a storm. Fear was in the eyes of the valley men. They packed their guns, ever on the alert, and said little.

Delaney avoided Mosquero town. Starr had purposefully avoided him, and he had no desire to see her. Savagely he flung himself into the work of salvaging all the hides possible. It helped quiet the insistent tugging of unrest that roweled his soul.

A week passed. The night the week was up, Bowie, Dewitt Edgerton, Mossy Cooper and Long John Pike rode to the Horseshoe. Bowie acted as the spokesman. He told Tex of the pool men's plans. They had to have money to see them through the winter. The only market for their hides was in Rockport, along the Gulf, and to send individual wagons through was only asking for trouble from the renegades that infested the trail.

"We plan to pool our wagons and go through in a train, Tex. In numbers we'll find safety. As a boy you went with your pa over every foot of that trail. You know it—and you know how to fight. We want you to throw in with us and go as wagon boss, Tex."

"That's a lot of responsibility to put on one man, gents," Delaney said.

"We wouldn't be asking you," Long John Pike said, "unless we knowed we could trust you. You don't need to give us your answer now. Think it over. And come to the meeting we're holding at Bowie's house tomorrow night."

"Will Lamont be there?"

"He aims to come," Bowie said. wincing. "It's kind of his idea that we all go together."

Bowie didn't reveal that Lamont had instigated the whole plan.

Before they left, Delaney said, "I'll be at the meeting and let you know then."

Next day he was working the brakes along the dark creek bed that adjoined the Horseshoe. From a hilltop he caught a glimpse of the distant buildings of Lamont's ranch. The buildings and corrals were in the finest repair. Every sign pointed to prosperity.

Delaney thought of Jean as turning, he dipped his horse down a brushy slope. A quarter-mile farther on he came to the edge of a small clearing—and stopped! Two men were bent over a fallen Horseshoe steer. One of them had a knife in hand, skinning the steer. Off to one side stood their rein-trailed horses, bearing Lamont's Circle L brand.

Rage ripped through Delaney. He dismounted, striding forward. At the jangle of his spurs the two men looked up, startled. Delaney's gun leaped into his fist, menacing the beef-skinners.

"When the cow business *was* the cow business," he grated, "we shot rustlers, or hung them. Keep your hands away from your gun, Squatty, or I'll drive a bullet through your brisket!"

Both men straightened, a tinge of fear flicking into their eyes. From all he had heard, Delaney knew the squat man was Jacques Chaffee, the Circle L foreman. He had the black hair and swart skin of an Indian, but his eyes were dead and colorless pools that contrasted strangely.

Patently there was mixed blood in the man. Squat, thick-chested, and powerfully built, he stood like a gorilla, thick lips pulled back in a sneer. A slouchy black hat was pulled low over his eyes. His ducking jacket and leather leggins were scarred.

THE man with Chaffee was a tall, blundering brute, with the low-swung guns and expressionless face of a killer. A scar raced the full length of one cheek, giving his features a distorted look. In his right hand was the skinning knife, dripping blood.

"That's the big he-coon we been hearing about, Chaffee," he chortled mirthlessly.

"Shut up, Chino," Chaffee growled. He kept his eyes on Delaney. "We heard you busted out of prison, Delaney. Why the bellyaching and the big gun?"

Delaney said icily, "The Horseshoe boundary is on the other side of the creek, Chaffee. There's likely enough dead stuff bearing the Lamont brand for you to work on over there. That cow you're skinning is wearing the Horseshoe brand. Now light a shuck!"

"Ringy, huh?" Chaffee smirked, not moving.

"You heard me."

"We been hearing you might prove tough Delaney. That's the way us Circle L boys like 'em. Fallen beef hides go to the first gent to skin 'em off. That's the unwritten law, and I reckon it'll stay that way. Shuck your gun and I'll learn you—with my bare hands. Chino here won't lift a hand. Only me."

Delaney's face didn't lose its icy mold. But all the torment and the agony of the past few weeks boiled up in him in an angry froth. He accepted the challenge with a slow drawl.

"Slip off your guns then, Chaffee. If that's the way you feel there's no better time than the present."

Wearily Delaney holstered his gun, unbuckled his belt and tossed it to the ground as Chaffee did, also. Tex knew he was taking a desperate chance. But all his life, it seemed, he had bucked odds.

Off to one side, Chino stood with the bloody knife still in his hands, grinning. Stripped of his guns and coat, Chaffee swaggered forward, huge fists knotted, confident. Obviously he was a rough-and-tumble fighter who barred no holds. Kick, stamp and gouge were his tactics.

"Ready, Mr. Delaney?" he taunted.

"Come and get it, Chaffee!"

Chaffee came, charging like a bull—and just as fast and furious. Coolly Delaney stepped back, sent a straight-arm right through the man's guard that jerked the swart man's head up and suddenly brought blood to his lips. Surprise leaped into Chaffee's faded eyes, but he whirled and charged again. And again Delaney drove him back with a smashing right that would have felled a steer.

In the army, Delaney had spent all his spare time learning the art of boxing. He had learned to dodge, duck and feint. He had learned the importance of fast, accurate footwork and timing. It puzzled Chaffee, blackened his face with bewildered fury. He had fought men twice his size, downed them, and then kicked their ribs in. He could crush a man in a bear hug, so powerful were his arms.

"Stand still, damn you!" he panted furiously.

"You asked for it, Chaffee." Delaney grinned.

"Stand still!"

Delaney stood still—too long. Chaffee came in fast, both arms driving like pistons, snarling as Delaney's chopping blows cut his face. Delaney's arms were up, his guard momentarily broken. Chaffee's knee came up into Delaney's groin, tearing a sob of agony from him. Delaney bent, face writhing and white. Chaffee unloosed a haymaker into his face that crashed like a pistol shot.

The world suddenly exploded in front of Delaney's eyes in a red burst of fire. He reeled back, tripped and fell, every fibre of his body screaming with pain. His ears roared. There was blood and dirt in his mouth.

Senses reeling, he rolled as Chaffee came at him to stamp and kick. Then he crawled to his feet, reeling like a drunken man.

"You dirty low-life son!" he gritted.

AS IN a hazy blur he saw Chaffee's smirking face coming toward him. Sobbing for breath, he ducked and dodged, trying to recoup his strength. It was go on or die, and he knew it. Chaffee had baited him into the trap to kill him. And even if Delaney won, there was the gunman Chino.

Twice Delaney saw his chance and drove through terrific rights. He feinted and swayed, employing every boxing tactic and all the skill he knew. Hope surged through him as Chaffee began tiring. The Circle L foreman was blowing, his face was cut and bleeding. One eye was swelling.

Once he went down and came up, raging thickly. "Gun him, Chino! He's too much for me!"

"Like he said, you asked for it, Chaffee," Chino chortled.

Delaney laughed as they came together. Toe to toe they stood, swapping sledge-hammer blows that would have downed most men. But Delaney's six feet of whang and barb-wire took it, and dished out more. He rocked Chaffee back on his heels, followed through with rights and lefts. With a wild, frantic look, the Circle L man back-tracked. Then Delaney dropped him.

Chaffee didn't come up from that last blow. He fell flat on his back, nose broken, eyes blacked and swart face bloody. Delaney, trembling and exhausted, turned to face the other man. Chino, his scarred face still expressionless, had not moved. Something akin to admiration flicked into his eyes.

"I guess them folks that said you was tough wasn't lying, Delaney," he said. "I ain't got no crow to pick with you right now. Chaffee asked for his beating. There being no marbles to pick up, I'll rouse him and go home."

Delaney walked tiredly back to where his gun and belt lay on the ground. Strapping the belt about his waist and, pulling on his ducking jacket, he mounted his horse. From the saddle he watched Chino lug his foreman's limp body to one of the horses, thong him across the saddle. Then Chino mounted the other animal, held the reins of the unconscious man's horse, and rode off into the brush.

Delaney jogged back toward the Horseshoe ranch house. Tomorrow he would send Chili down for the hide.

Another wintry evening was casting gloomy shadows across the great expanse of Mustang Valley. Here and there in the patches of brush lay thin blankets of snow. Judging by the thickening stormheads more snow was in the offing.

Restlessness and discontent struck at Delaney deeper than his hurt. This range was his home; he loved it. Once he had known peace and happiness here, but those joys eluded him now. The future was blacker then he had ever known it. He had made a deadly enemy out of Jacques Chaffee tonight. And Chaffee was not a man to forget a grudge.

In the shed Delaney unrigged his horse, fed the stock and turned toward the dark house, wondering about Chili. In the kitchen he lighted a

lamp, got arnica and water and bathed his cut face. He was sore and stiff, but the agonizing pain in his thigh had lessened.

On a table in the front room he found a pencil-scrawled note with Chili's name signed to it.

> Tex—
> I am going to work the north end of the valley and maybe it will be late when I get back.
>
> Chili

Delaney made a pot of coffee, drank what he wanted, and left the rest on the kitchen stove for Chili. Then he returned to the shed, saddled, and started off down the rutted wagon road toward Mosquero.

He couldn't stall the urge to see Starr any longer. It wasn't like her to avoid him, even if she was married. If Captain Strang was with her it might give Delaney a chance to clear up a lot of things. Strange that Captain Strang, representative of military law in Brasada, had made no move toward Delaney and Chili, both of whom were fugitives.

"Get along, bronc," he said softly. "While we're asking for trouble let's ask for it in big lumps. . . ."

MOSQUERO town lay at the south end of Mustang Valley, at the toe of the tumbled, brush-dotted hills. There was one main street with a side road that angled through a slot in the hills toward the Rio Grande. For weeks on end the mud in that street was hub-deep and all but impassable.

The false-fronted stores in the center of town all looked alike—unpainted, weather-beaten structures with hitch-racks along the plank walks. Bottles Lawrence, a little man with a bulbous red nose, owned the main saloon and did a little horse trading on the side. Next to his place was the saddle shop, then the barber shop, and

[*Turn page*]

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the Lone Star Restaurant.

Doc Tidwell had his office across the street above the general merchandise store, and the sheriff's office was next door. Sam Whitehead, owner of the general store, Doc Tidwell, Parson Cripps and Sheriff Bowie Hoskins were friends of long standing. They would sit outside on the wooden bench before the sheriff's office during the summer, dozing in the sun and talking.

The houses in Mosquero stood along the street, one after the other. There were black-barked mesquite trees in the yards, and lace curtains at the windows. Most of the menfolks worked on nearby ranches, drank a little on Saturday nights, and went to Parson Cripps's church on Sunday. The women, calico-clad and toil-bent, held a weekly sewing circle at various homes and wondered why the long-legged parson had never married.

Parson Cripps's rough plank church was at the edge of town. Back of it was a small cemetery. Beyond it the high black mesquite stretched as far as the eye could see. The parson was a genial man with sad, watery eyes and stiltlike legs. He believed in the infinite goodness of God and mankind, wore a long-tailed black coat, and rode a mule on his sick calls. He lived in a small frame house at the side of the church, a home which the ladies of the sewing circle had decorated for him.

After the war things had changed in Mosquero. A small Army Post was established in the brush just south of town. Log quarters, a mess hall and a guardhouse were built. Word went around that this company of bluecoats, under the command of Captain Strang, had been sent here to protect and guard the Border. But since their coming, lawlessness had increased.

VI

THE townspeople in Mosquero openly resented the presence of the military in their midst. The ladies of the sewing circle told of seeing some of the bluecoats drunk, of other women being rudely accosted by some of the soldiers. According to their husbands, they said, Captain Strang was making no effort to establish peace and security.

Most of the time he spent in Bottles Lawrence's saloon, drinking. It was an outrage the way he carried on. And him marrying Starr Hoskins! She was far too good for him, even if she had been inclined to be skittish when younger.

Sheriff Hoskins shook his head hopelessly when the trouble grew worse. There was nothing he could do about it. He pitied Starr for the mistake she had made in marrying Captain Strang, and visited her whenever he could.

No one liked Strang. Everyone feared Pierre Lamont and his tough crew.

"Something bad's going to happen," Sam Whitehead predicted mournfully to whoever would listen to his dire predictions. "Ain't going to be nothing left of this here valley. The drought and cattle drifting, bushwhackings and queer things happening. Lamont is grabbing onto all the land and his men is stealing hides. Lamont's a bad 'un, I tell you. And, Strang strutting around in his uniform. I seen their kind during the war."

And on Sundays, Parson Cripps preached of tolerance and love and unity.

Rocky times in Texas. Rocky times.

The dreary wintry night closed in on Mosquero. The muted undertone of the town was lost in the whine of the wind. Lamplight glowed from the windows of some of the stores.

When the last customer left the Lone Star Restaurant, the girl who had been Starr Hoskins locked the front door, blew out the lamp, and went quickly to a room in the rear, off the kitchen. It was a small room, furnished with a girl's neat taste. There were a dresser, a bed and a table, with a wood stove in the corner.

For the past month, Starr had made

her home back here, too proud to return to her father's home. For a moment she stopped before the dresser mirror. She pushed back her copper-colored hair. There was a tired look in her eyes that made her look older than her twenty-three years. A sob caught in her throat.

She went to the table and finished writing a letter that she had started that morning. It was to someone in St. Louis and said:

> Dear Aunt Sarah—
> Thanks for your last letter, asking me to come live with you and Uncle Fred. I believe I'll take you up. I can't stand it here much longer. It's the loneliness, I guess, and the smell of things dying—

She paused, glancing up as the knob of the outer door began to turn. Quickly she stuffed the unfinished letter into the bosom of her dress. She rose as the door creaked inward. The lamp sputtered and a man stepped inside, kicking the door closed.

Starr's voice was flat, cold. "What do you want, Lew?"

Captain Lew Strang stood there, white and grim and coldly sneering, his service hat cocked at a rakish angle, his long coat damp with melting snow. He was handsome, after a fashion, tall and beady-eyed. He reveled in his own power and enjoyed his vices with unmasked relish.

"I'm taking you back to quarters, Starr," he said.

"We've been through all that, Lew," she said patiently.

"Then I'm taking you back by force!"

She smelled the whisky on his breath as he advanced toward her. But she faced him, splendidly cool and unafraid, her chest heaving from the fires of her loathing.

"Don't you touch me, Lew!" she warned huskily. "I hate you with every ounce of my being! Oh, what a blind fool I was when I married you! You promised to take me away from here, and I believed you. You promised me everything a girl could want—"

"I changed my mind, Starr," Strang grated. "I see big possibilities here in Mustang Valley. This trouble is not going to last forever."

"You haven't got enough courage to go on living in this country, Lew. Take off that uniform and you're a drunken tramp. If folks knew just how rotten you are they'd hang you!"

CAPTAIN STRANG'S eyes smoldered with rage. He bit his lips.

"Still thinking of Tex Delaney, sweetheart?" he drawled.

"I'll always think of Tex Delaney, Lew!" Starr flared. "He's as fine and good as you are bad!"

"You're going to listen to me, Starr, or I'll have him shipped back to prison. If you don't think I got the power to do it, try me! You're going back to the quarters I've got fixed up for you. You begged me to leave Delaney alone, and I've done it for your sake. Now you're going to listen to me or, by hell, I'll kill you!"

Starr paled just the slightest. "Then kill me! For I'm not going back!"

Strang's right hand flashed out. He struck Starr across the face, flinging her back against the wall. She made no outcry. She knew she was no match for him physically. She had tried that before.

Eyes flashing with all the venom a woman can know, she said, "You filthy cur!"

Strang smiled thinly. "Be ready in an hour, Starr. I'm closing up this place and taking you with me. I'll be back for you in an hour."

He walked out, closing the door at his back. Starr remained standing against the wall, her arms spread, eyes flooded with suffering and hate. Then the tears came. She looked pitifully small, standing there. There was a hollowness about her eyes, a dazed, hurt look.

After a time her lips moved in a whispered prayer for help.

Outside a wintry moon rose higher and higher, casting its dismal glow

upon the stricken range with its odor of dead things, not so far north of the sluggish Rio Grande. Lights blinked out in the houses that flanked Main Street, and the wind wailed louder, whining through the brush outside like the voices of dying men.

Starr stood listening. For the first time in her life she knew the meaning of fear. Minutes passed. Then, above the sound of the wind, she thought she heard the sound of a slow-moving horse. When the sound died a kind of limpness came over her.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them she heard a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in," she said weakly.

The door opened and closed, and a man stood across the room from her. Their eyes met and held, and in a ghostly whisper of gladness, Starr said:

"Tex! Tex!"

She moved toward him, and he came to meet her. She saw the cuts on his face. She saw how he had changed. And with her woman's intuition she sensed the fierce battle that was raging inside him.

He had his hat in his hand. "Howdy, Starr," he said in a strained way.

"You knew I lived here?" she asked.

"Your father told me."

They fell silent. Words were such futile things. They were together with their memories—and they weren't pleasant. There was a barrier between them. Both had changed. And both were trying to think of the right thing to say.

"Lived here long, Starr?" he asked.

"About a month."

"Alone?"

She nodded.

"Where's—your husband?"

"At the Army Post."

Another awkward pause. Then he said, "I had to see you, Starr."

"I'm glad you came. Only you'd better go now. Come back later. You see, he's coming for me."

"Strang?"

"Yes."

DELANEY read the misery in her eyes. Pity touched him. He knew now that he had never loved Starr Hoskins. Nor she him. Love could not have died so quickly. Theirs had been a devotion such as exists between brother and sister.

"*Bueno*, Starr," he said softly. "I'll go, but I'll be back. Maybe you can help me. I got back in time to find Dad dead—murdered. I'm going to run down the man that did it if I have to trail him through all the fires of hell!"

"Tex, listen!" she pleaded tensely. "I'll do anything to help you. I know the battle you're fighting. Only—"

"What, Starr?"

Her emotions broke then. "I can't stand it here any longer, Tex! I'm leaving, going to live with my aunt in St. Louis. Don't tell a soul, please! I don't even want Dad to know. You're not blind. You must know I hate the man I married. I only did it after word came that you were dead. You'll never understand."

"I think I understand everything, Starr."

"Captain Strang hates you," she declared. "He's responsible for your being kept a prisoner after the war was over. Did you know?"

Tex shook his head. He hadn't been sure, but he was not surprised.

"He's got ambitions to be a mighty rancher, like Lamont," Starr went on. "And he'll do anything to gain what he wants—lie, steal, even kill. I believe he'd do that! They talk of Cortina's raids. He *has* made some raids, but they didn't amount to anything. It's men like Strang and Lamont that you'll have to watch."

"What do you mean, Starr?"

"I can't explain now, Tex! Just believe me— Oh, maybe I'm hysterical tonight—I don't know. But do this for me—please, please, take care of Dad! He needs help and guidance, and I've failed him. Don't let him lose the ranch. Don't let my kid sisters and brothers out there at the ranch starve. Will you promise to look out for him when I'm gone, Tex?"

"I promise, Starr."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Her lips trembled.

"Thanks, Tex," she said. "Thanks."

He turned to go.

"One more favor, cowboy."

He forced a grin. "What's that, sorrel-top?"

"Kiss me."

As he bent and kissed her, he felt a chill draft, and turned. Neither of them had heard the door open. Captain Strang stood there facing them, lips twisted in a cold smile.

"No introductions are necessary, Starr," he purred. "Your lover and I have met before."

Tex whirled, and stared. This *was* the man—the same Captain Strang to whom he was indebted for so many agonized hours.

Strang's smile faded. Face working with feline savagery, he started forward, right hand dropping to the butt of the holstered pistol beneath his coat. Cat-quick, Delaney lashed out with his fist, catching Strang between the eyes. The captain crashed back against the door and slumped to the floor, his pistol clattering to the planks beside him.

Delaney stepped over to him, scooped up the pistol. It was a .45 Colt single-action, Frontier model. He jacked out a bullet. It was identical with the empty shell he had in his pocket! Ugly suspicions beat at him. Brain afire with rioting emotions, he turned toward the stark-eyed girl, handed her the gun.

"Keep this for him, Starr," he rapped. "Get me a cold wash rag and I'll fetch him around."

"I'll do that, Tex. You'd better leave."

"You can handle him?"

"I can handle any of them, Tex. You know I've always been able to take care of myself. Tonight you taught me how to fight. I'd almost forgotten how. You go on. I'll fetch him around and if he gets tough I'll give him a mate to the one you just gave him. *Adios,* cowboy!"

She was laughing and crying at the same time when Delaney left. She heard him ride away, walked over to the bed and sat down, the six-shooter dangling from her hands.

CAPTAIN STRANG moaned, stirred, and opened his eyes. He look at Starr a long time, and what he saw in her eyes must have warned him.

"Where did he go?" he snarled.

"Who?" she asked innocently.

"You know who I mean," he roared.

"I don't know, Lew."

Strang's face bloated with fury. His eyes glowed feverishly. Slowly he climbed to his feet.

"Give me that gun!" he said thickly.

Starr smiled coldly. "This is one piece of Government property that I'm keeping, Lew. Tex Delaney opened my eyes tonight to how weak I've been. From here on I continue to go my own way and you yours. But I'm warning you—if you make any trouble for Tex I swear I—I'll kill you! Now get out!"

Face twitching and deadly white, Strang departed with no other word, slamming the door. It would be several days before his swollen eyes were normal again. Starr locked the door after him and blew out the light. Then she flopped across the bed and wept. . . .

Delaney left the scattered lights of Mosquero town behind, guiding his horse along the brush-fringed road that angled to Sheriff Hoskins's ranch. The lawman's little place, centrally located in the valley, had always been a meeting place for the cowmen. And since the death of Delaney's father, the mantle of leadership had patently fallen to Bowie Hoskins.

Delaney was plunged into a painful turmoil of cross currents as he considered Starr's plight. The more he probed his own predicament the more confusing it seemed. There was the constant threat of a raid by Juan Cortina. If rumor was true, Cortina and his band were in the business of steal-

ing hides and freighting them through to the Gulf Coast on the Mexican side of the river.

Then there was Captain Strang and the bristling resentment he and the Union troopers had caused. The bullets in Strang's gun were identical with the one that had killed Frank Delaney. Suspicion of Strang was strong in Delaney. The army captain had openly boasted that he wanted a ranch in Mustang Valley. There was a chance that in killing Frank Delaney he had seen an opportunity of gaining ownership of the Horseshoe outfit.

In Delaney's encounter with Chaffee and the other tough Circle L man, Tex had been quick to notice the guns they packed. Both men's guns were .44s, Delaney was sure. But Stang's was a .45!

VII

LIGHTS of Hoskins's Leaning H ranch house suddenly glimmered in black night ahead of Tex Delaney. Snow still came slanting down on the bitter cold wind, rapidly turning to sleet as the temperature dropped.

Bowie Hoskins's ranch house was a sprawling structure of rough-hewn logs. He had hauled the timber down out of the hills, adding more rooms as needed. He had a truck patch in the rear and some fruit trees, which helped supply the needs of his children. By butchering his own beef and being frugal, Bowie had managed to get by.

He was not the type to be a lawman. Everybody knew he had been awarded the job through pity. Even so, the pittance he received from the job did not supply his needs.

Saddled horses, buckboards and the teams hitched to them stood in the yard. From one of the corrals came the restless stir and moan of cattle. In the kitchen the Hoskins children were doing the supper dishes. Through the front room windows Delaney saw some of the assembled pool men, the drone of their voices carrying outside.

As Delaney dismounted a small figure darted out of the shadows, sped toward him. When he drew near he slowed, and Delaney recognized Bowie's oldest youngster, a boy of twelve.

"Howdy, Tad," he said grinning. "Long time no see."

"Same to you, Tex. Only you sure might have come over sooner. You used to come real often when Starr was living with us."

The youth's candid resentment stung Delaney. When he had left for war, Tad Hoskins had been only a little button. He had followed Delaney around, imitating his every gesture and fairly idolizing the ground Tex walked on. The kid had grown into a thin-faced, gangling youngster with hungry eyes and an exaggerated pride that poverty sometimes nurtures. That he was hurt, terribly hurt, was plain.

Delaney remembered seeing Tad at his own father's funeral. But so engrossed with his own somber thoughts and grief had he been that he had overlooked the boy.

"I'm sorry, Tad," he said quietly. "But I've never forgotten you."

Tad brightened. "You mean that, Tex?"

"Never meant anything more, Tad. If I've slighted you, pard, it's been because I've had so much on my mind. How about shaking and starting new?"

"Shucks, pardner. It suits me."

Delaney grasped the boy's thin hand in a firm clasp. Tad grinned happily, then the troubled look flicked back into his eyes. In breathless whispers he hurriedly told of much of the trouble that Delaney already knew about.

"Plenty's going to pop, Tex. I see it coming, and so does Pop. Only he tries to quiet us kids. Whatever happens I want to side you, pard. I can shoot, and can ride anything with hair or feathers. Don't blame Sis for marrying that skunk of a sojer. Keep your eyes on that Lamont. He's the dark feller in the woodpile. He's in there now telling Pop and the others about coming out of their tight by freighting

our cowhides through to his taller factory in Rocksport."

"Maybe Lamont's not so bad, Tad."

"Bad?" the kid scoffed fiercely. "Shucks, Tex! He's worse'n that! Don't fall for his hog-wash. I ain't blind, even if I am just a button. He's got plans for starving every honest cowman out of the valley and laying claim to the land for hisself. Watch him, Tex. Watch him like you would a coiled rattler. Him and his fine talk. Huh! It smells like skunk juice to me."

"I'll keep my eyes peeled, Tad."

"And if you need me, whistle, pard. Jeb Wilkins was shot and killed from the brush last summer. Then your pa, he was killed. And not a trace of who done it! But you and me can get to the bottom of it with a little undercover work."

"We'll work together, Tad," Delaney said grimly. "Anything you hear or see that might give us a clue, let me know. *Adios* for now, pard, and keep a stiff upper lip!"

Delaney strode up onto the porch as the boy darted back toward the kitchen door. Bowie met Delaney, gripping his hand.

"Glad you seen fit to come, Tex," he murmured. "Guess you know all these men here, except Lamont. This is Pierre Lamont, owner of the Circle L."

A HUSH dropped over the assemblage. Delaney met the friendly gazes of the valley ranchers with a nod, then turned toward the man he had heard so much about.

Pierre Lamont stood at the head of the gathering, a big man with every mark of breeding and culture and leadership. Poise and supreme confidence showed in a startling contrast to the uncertainty, fear and bewilderment of the poverty-ridden, back-to-the-wall cowmen he faced.

Lamont was garbed in a fine black suit, highly polished hand-sewn boots and a white linen shirt with a string bow tie. He was in his middle forties. His black mustache, long burnsides and dark hair were immaculately groomed. A caricature of a smile touched his lips. His dark eyes were appraising, shadowed with unreadable subterranean thoughts.

"How do you do, Delaney," he said ponderously.

There was none of the slight accent so often found in people of French descent. Delaney grasped the extended hand, a queer, tickling feeling racing up his spine. He didn't know why. And then, like a smashing blow, he thought of Jean, this man's daughter, And wondered if she'd ever told him—

"Howdy, Lamont," he said tightly.

Delaney turned, took one of the seats offered him. In the awkward silence, Bowie cleared his throat and said:

"Go on with your plans, Lamont."

Pierre Lamont dropped his smile. He became all business.

"I've explained my plans, gentlemen. You can work out the details later with my foreman, Jacques Chaffee. Business calls me back to New Orleans."

"I thought—" Bowie began humbly.

Lamont stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"I'll give a brief resume so that Delaney can understand, Hoskins. The deal is simply this, Delaney. I know the financial tight you men are in. This is a reconstruction going on in Texas and times are bad. I don't want to see you men fail. In Rockport I have established the largest hide and tallow factory on the coast. I'm in a position to buy your hides and pay more than the market value."

Lamont's voice boomed with enthusiasm. He would, he said, pay a flat rate of ten dollars a hide upon delivery in Rockport. Hides were all that mattered these days, not beef. His Circle L men would help plan the details. He could make money by buying the hides at such a figure, and the Mustang Valley Pool men could recoup their losses, hold their land.

"I know some of you men have re-

sented me." He shrugged. "And to overcome that I want to prove that I'm a good neighbor. Delaney, I'm sorry to hear of the trouble you had with two of my men this afternoon. Such misunderstandings are what I want to clear up. I am told that your father was recently murdered, and that other ranchers in the past have suffered the same fate. We can expect such tragedies in this land until law and order come. Let's make the best of it and fight this thing through. Any questions, gentlemen?"

The pool men sat with sagging jaws, eyes darting from face to face.

"I reckon not, Lamont," Delaney said quietly.

"Then I'll be going, gentlemen."

Lamont nodded and smiled, and shook hands with Bowie as he went out. He seemed to take all the air out of the room with him. Bowie leaned against the door, a faint ray of hope glimmering in his eyes. When they heard the rattle of Lamont's buckboard Mossy Cooper shook loose from the spell.

"What do you make of it—and of him—Tex?"

"On the face of it, his proposition sounds good."

That started a muttering. Heads wagged. They didn't know, didn't know. Pierre Lamont was a "furriner." He was too high and mighty for such folks as them.

DELANEY snapped to his feet, eyes blazing.

"Cut out the babble, gents! We're getting no place. My mind's made up. I'm corraling every hide Chili and I can lay a knife to, and hauling them through to Rockport. We might as well face the facts. None of us have a spare dollar. We're broke, dead broke, and we're going to lose our ranches if we don't get some money quick.

"Dad and you men fought like hell for your spreads. And they're worth fighting for again. This drought and the smashed beef market won't last always. Let's sell enough hides to get us through this winter. Bowie, your kids go hungry at times. You're fooling nobody. Newberry, your wife and daughter are killing theirselves with worry. And the same condition applies to you other men. Forget your grudge against Lamont and your ugly suspicions. The war's over! Let's load our wagons with hides and go to Rockport!"

Delaney's words were like a lash, whipping the men to their senses. New hope brightened their eyes, made their haggard faces work with excitement. And Delaney prayed fervently that he was doing right.

"By glory, Tex," Bowie said huskily, "you've made me see the light!"

Lane Newberry nodded, as did the others. In Delaney they had found the fighting, gambling leader they needed.

Plans were quickly whipped into shape. This was November. By the first of December they could have their hides in shape, their wagons repaired and ready for the trip.

"It's our salvation, Tex!" Long John Pile exclaimed jubilantly. "Our salvation! Only one thing. You're younger than the rest of us. But you know the trail and the dangers of raids. Will you go along as wagon boss?"

"If that's the way you men want it," Delaney replied.

There was no doubt but that was the way they wanted it. No vote was necessary. Afire with new hope, they wrung Delaney's hand. Later they tramped out to their horses and buckboards, whooping with joy. Delaney hung behind until he and Bowie were alone. Some of the deep-seated worry and fear was back in the oldster's eyes.

"Been to see Starr, Tex?" he asked softly.

"Saw her before coming out here, Bowie."

"Meet Lew Strang?"

Delaney nodded grimly, saying nothing about his brief battle with the Army man. Bowie looked away, pawing one side of his seamy face.

"Tex, God knows I hope we're doing right in trusting Lamont. But I don't

know. It's our only out, that's sure. Play your cards close to your chest and watch them gunhawks of his. When you start through with them hides of our'n, you'll have our lives in your hands. If something should happen we'll be forced to get out."

The wind and sleet had died by the time Delaney rode away from the Leaning H. The night had cleared. Stars glimmered from the heavens and a red moon soared over the hills, spotting the rangeland with weird etchings of ghostly light and black shadows. It was quiet and cold, but Delaney could gather no peace to still his inner turmoil. Somewhere beneath the quiet was a sinister hint of disaster that made his flesh crawl.

He rode slowly through the high black brush, brooding and watchful, living again all that had happened tonight. Invariably his thoughts turned to Jean Lamont. She, who was so lovely and desirable was promised in marriage to Jacques Chaffee! Chaffee—an uncouth, swaggering killer, twice her age!

It seemed incredible!

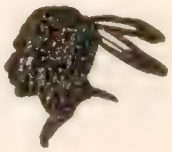
Delaney could find no answer to it. It rankled, but after all, he told himself, Jean's affairs were not his. He tried to shake her image from his mind, but she stayed with him like an unwelcome saddlemate.

Still a mile from his ranch, Delaney crashed his horse through a dense thicket into a *sendero*—a clearing. A butcher bird fluttered from its roost in the brush. A stick cracked off to one side of the dim trail, and tides of warning flashed through Delaney. He whirled, right hand diving down to the holstered six-shooter at his hip as

WESTERN NUGGETS

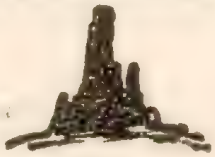
ONLY SOME 155 MEN were under the command of Col. William B. Travis in defending the Alamo against Mexican General Santa Anna. About 30 men from Gonzales, under Capt. Albert Martin, broke through Santa Anna's line to raise the valiant Texan force to around 185.

EARLY SETTLERS in Iowa were terrorized by an Indian tribe under a chief named "Hawkeye"—which is the reason that to this day Iowa is referred to as the "Hawkeye State."



DR. RICHARD TANNER, a prominent frontiersman (better known as Diamond Dick), rode a horse 5,500 miles in 240 consecutive days.

IN THE LOW CLIFFS near Kemmerer, Wyoming, fossils are preserved of creatures that lived 50,000,000 years ago.



THE BED IS USED as a grave marker by the Indians in their cemetery at Fort Washakie, Wyo. They figure that a bed makes a better symbol of eternal rest than cold stone.

By HAROLD HELFER

a crouched figure took shape in the gloom.

Too late Delaney's gun cleared leather. With the horror of that knowledge he threw himself from the saddle as the bushwhacker's gun roared. Searing, blinding pain suddenly filled him. Terrible shock jarred his brain and robbed him of strength. He felt himself falling, and then the black robes of unconsciousness engulfed him and he knew no more.

His body struck the frozen ground, rolled and lay still. His horse bolted away, smashing noisily through the brush. Off to one side the shadowy figure of the bushwhacker darted back to a pocket in the mesquite where his horse stood with trailing reins. Flinging astride, he rode away.

Overhead the red moon soared on through the clouds, and the wind whispered sibilantly through the brush, like a warning of more bloodshed to come.

VIII

YOUNG TEX DELANEY revived in a world of agonizing pain and swirling nausea. For a full moment he lay still trying to collect his senses. It was like awakening from a nightmare.

Biting back a groan, he took a chance on stopping another shot from the brush and struggled to a sitting position. Blood caked one entire side of his face. Gentle probing fingers told him that the bushwhacker's bullet had gashed his temple just below the hairline. The wound had clotted, staying the flow of blood.

He was stiff and sore and half-frozen. Ribbons of fire roared through his body as he dragged himself slowly to his feet. Dazedly he got his directions and began stumbling through the brush toward home. A hundred feet farther on he came upon his horse, standing with snagged reins.

It took all of Delaney's reserve strength to pull himself into saddle. He clung to the kak horn, head dropping on his chest as the mount picked its way. It seemed like hours before the Horseshoe ranch buildings loomed into view. A small light glowed from the front room windows.

Too weak and spent to do more, Delaney pulled up near the gallery and dropped weakly to the ground. As he stumbled toward the house the front door opened and Chili stood there, a six-shooter clutched in his hand. When Delaney reeled into the block of light the little Mexican screamed.

"Tex! I thought I heard a shot. *Valiente!*"

Chili helped him into the house, laid him down on a sofa in the front room. Cursing in Spanish, moaning, he hurried into the kitchen for warm water and clean cloth for a bandage. As he bathed and dressed the wound he kept mumbling to himself.

"Who deed eet, Tex?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," Delaney replied.

"Bushwhack?"

Delaney nodded. His eyes closed and he lay there like a dead man, breathing slowly. Chili knelt beside him like a man praying, his soul-weary bloodshot eyes wide, All the fire was gone from him. He felt only hopelessness and fear.

"Tex," he whispered, after a while.

But there was no answer. Only the sputter of the lamp on the table and the low moan of the wind outside where the red moon shone down. The fear kept eating into Chili. Delaney had been shot, and without Tex the little Mexican was helpless. Tex had planned his prison escape for him, told him exactly what to do.

Chili felt clamminess in the palms of his brown-skinned hands. He grabbed up his six-shooter, ran to the kitchen, and outside. Bowie Hoskins would help, he knew. Out in the dark shed he rigged his horse, leaped into saddle and spurred away. The sound of his horse's frantic galloping died away.

In the front room of the house Delaney moaned. His eyes fluttered open and he stared at the ceiling. At first

the sound of riders pulling up in the yard didn't register in his consciousness. He felt a gust of fresh air as the door banged open, then heard men tramping into the room. And out of the haze came a raspy voice.

"There he is, men! Search him and handcuff him!"

Red rage shook Delaney as blue-coated troopers, pistols palmed, grabbed his wrists and legs.

"Hey, Captain," one of the soldiers growled, "the fellow's hurt! He's been shot!"

"Which makes our chore all the easier!" Captain Strang grated. "Handcuff him!"

Delaney saw Strang then over the shoulders of the soldiers. Pistol in hand, the captain stood in the middle of the room. His eyes were swollen and purple but he was grinning gloatingly.

ROUGH hands jerked Delaney to his feet, held him while others searched him and snapped handcuffs. Helpless, he stood white-faced and swaying, eyes feverish beneath the stained bandage about his forehead.

"What's your game this time, Strang?" he managed.

"No game, Delaney." Strang smirked at him. "I'm placing you under arrest and turning you over to the Federal Government for prosecution. Going to do anything about it?"

Hate, swift and terrible raged through Delaney, and he felt positive now that he was face to face with the man who had killed his father!

"You hold aces now, Strang," he said in a bitter whisper, "and you'd best hold tight. For if I live I'm going to kill you!"

Strang shouldered his way through the group. Face set with deadly intent, he grasped Delaney's manacled hands, then swung. Too weak and sick to dodge, Delaney went down like a pole-axed steer.

Sensing the fierce rebuke in his men, Strang whirled on them, snapped an order to fetch the prisoner. He went outside, mounted, and waited until his men had thonged Delaney's limp body across the saddle of his horse. Then he gave them orders to follow him.

An hour later, Captain Strang led his troopers into Mosquero and to the Army Post on the outskirts of the town. They passed the sentry and halted before the log guardhouse. Delaney was carried inside, placed on a bunk. Without consulting Strang, one of the troopers hurried to officers' quarters for the company physician.

Strang returned to the center of town, left his horse in front of the Lone Star Restaurant and strode around to the rear. A lamp burned inside. Without knocking, he opened the door which Starr had unlocked again to go outside for a moment and stepped inside. Starr, sitting on the bed sewing, looked up, startled.

"Hello, my sweet and charming wife," Strang said mirthlessly. "Where's the gun you took off of me earlier tonight?"

"Underneath the pillow here, Lew," Starr said tonelessly. "And don't make use of it. I'd hate to kill you. But if you start something, I will."

"Bedtime, isn't it?"

"I'm the judge of that."

She knew by his eyes that something terrible had happened. Her heart pounded in her throat. She wanted to scream at the man taunting her, but no sound came.

"Delaney's in the brig, Starr," he said then. "I just took some men out and brought him in. He's going back to prison."

He watched his wife, watched her hands, for fear she would make a grab for the pistol. His own hand dangled near the butt of his gun. When she made no move he backed out the door, closing it behind him. Outside, he stood in the darkness for several seconds, waiting. When no stir came from Starr's quarters he hurried back to the street.

It was late, but light still shone from the window of Bottles Lawrence's sa-

loon. Strang swaggered inside, glanced up and down the room, and stepped up to the bar. Bottles Lawrence stopped counting the money in his cash drawer and scowled.

"What'll you have, Strang?" he grunted.

"Captain Strang to you, Red-nose!" the army man snarled.

Bottles set out whisky and a glass. A mustanger and a Mexican sheepherder stood farther down the bar near the hot pot-bellied stove. Otherwise the place was empty. They watched Strang down a quick drink. His hands didn't shake so much after he'd had half a dozen.

"Tex Delaney," he said nastily, "is in the brig over at the Post."

"Hell!" Bottles said.

"I'm sending him back to prison."

"Hell!" repeated Bottles.

"That's where his kind belong—in prison!"

"Hell!"

STRANG slapped his glass down on the bar top, breaking it. He leaped back, glowering, and fighting mad. His pistol was in his hand and he was a little tipsy.

"That's right!" he bawled savagely. "And if you say hell again I'll drill you!"

He stamped out and when the door slammed behind him Bottles bellowed, "Hell!" and ducked. . . .

Night shadows faded as a cold wintry dawn spread its mantle of light over the Brasada. Delaney opened his eyes to see the kindly Post physician bending over him. It took him a full minute to recall all that had happened.

"How do you feel, son?" the doctor asked gently.

"I'm all right."

The doctor smiled sadly. "Don't be harsh with me, Delaney. I know what you've been through. I'm going to do all I can for you, and I know your friends will do the same. Just remember this. All Army men are not like Captain Strang!"

"I know that, Doc."

"Rest all you can. You'll be all right."

The medico left. Delaney slept most of the day through. When he awoke a guard brought him hot broth, which he was able to eat. He felt better after that. The throbbing, searing pain in his head lessened. For hours he lay on his bunk, staring up at the barred window, barely conscious of the hum of activity of the camp.

Next day Bowie Hoskins was admitted to the prison to see him. The old lawman was glum and depressed. He asked about all that had occurred, and Delaney told him of being bushwhacked, then of Strang and his men riding to the ranch.

"Chili come tearing over to the house," the sheriff said. "Reckon it must have been near midnight. He said you had been shot and he was afraid you was dying. Me and Tad rode back with him. You was gone by the time we got there. We knew right off something was wrong and high-tailed into town. Bottles Lawrence was just closing up for the night. He was madder'n a hornet when he told us what Strang had done."

After that Bowie explained how the pool men were working to get ready for the drive to Rockport with their hides. But their hearts were not in their work now.

"Don't stop just because this has happened to me, Bowie!" Delaney rapped grimly. "Go ahead! It's your only chance. Man, don't you realize it? Chili will take my hides, repping for me. Send some of the younger men to make the trip. Men who know how to use their guns. But go!"

Bowie said they would, but he was half-hearted about it. It was as if all his world of hopes and plans had crumbled beneath him. Without some sort of leadership, he and the other pool men were lost.

"Anything I can do for you, Tex?" he asked despondently.

"Nothing, Bowie."

The guard escorted him out. Later that day Chili and Tad Hoskins paid

a call. Their report was much the same as Bowie's. And Delaney told them the same.

"It's up to you now, Chili. Gather every Horseshoe hide you can. Fix up the old wagon out in the shed and help get the pool men organized. You, Tad, help your pa all you can. He needs you now more than ever, pard."

"I will, Tex!" the boy said, a choke in his voice. "But what about you?"

"I'll get along, Tad."

The boy's eyes blazed. "Cuss 'em, Tex, they can't do this to you! I'll—"

"Set tight, pard." Delaney smiled. "Set tight."

The next day a group of valley men who had attended the meeting at Bowie's house visited Delaney in a body. The guard stood over them, permitting them to come only to the barred door of the cell. Ill at ease, they struggled vainly to hide the fury of their wrath. Regardless of the uniformed guard, old Mossy Cooper blurted:

"Say the word, Tex, and we'll organize every brushpopper in the Brasada! Feeling is running high, son. We'll take this damned Post apart, log by log, and ride these bluecoats out of here on a rail!"

"And gain nothing, Mossy!" Delaney told him. "No, do as I say—go through with the drive to Rockport. I'll come out of this tight somehow!"

FOR two days after that he saw no one but the guards and the Post physician. With rest and excellent care his wound began healing, but his strength was slow in returning. Impotent hate smoldered in him like a fever. Anxiety and impatience were like a saddle-sore that wouldn't heal. Right now the valley men needed him more than ever, and he was helpless.

Delaney struggled to retain his balance when it seemed that he would go mad. Fiercely he probed every angle for means of escape, but there was none. In his talk with the valley men he had felt the antagonism and distrust they felt for Pierre Lamont. They feared the dangers of the trail. The threat of Juan Cortina raiding was constantly a source of torment.

Next day Strang paid his first call to the guardhouse since Tex was a prisoner there. His beady eyes glowed triumphantly as he peered into Delaney's cell.

"I've made arrangements for a military guard to take you to prison, Delaney," he boasted. "You'll leave tonight. It's the first of December, so you'll be back in prison in time to enjoy Christmas. It might also interest you to know that Starr has come to her senses at last. She's coming to the Post to live with me. What do you say to that, my Rebel friend?"

"I had my say the night you fetched me here, Strang," Delaney said softly. "I'll live to kill you, that's all. Kill you for murdering my dad!"

Strang's eyes narrowed. "You must be crazy, Delaney."

He turned and strode out, snapping an order to the guard who had overheard their talk.

That afternoon Bowie and Chili were admitted to see the prisoner. Dread and worry lay deep in the oldster's eyes. Chili was strangely uneasy. They, as had been the case with visitors before them, were searched for any hidden weapons before entering.

"The wagon train leaves tonight, Tex," Bowie said gloomily. "We're taking your advice, hoping to God it's the right thing to do. Ten wagons is going through, including two of Lamont's and one of yours. Chaffee has been attending our meetings in Lamont's absence. Him and two of his tough hands is taking command. And that's what worries me. I don't trust 'em. They're not our kind."

"Maybe that's in our favor, Bowie," Delaney muttered.

Bowie wagged his head, chewing his tobacco cud mournfully.

"It's the biggest gamble we ever took, Tex. There's a fortune in them hides. Us older men are staying behind, letting the young bucks stand

the rigors. Chili is going, representing you. Long John Pike's two strapping boys are going, the Newberry boys and old man McPherson's younger brother, along with them two new ranchers in the valley. That's seven of our men and three of Lamont's men. One of our boys will do the cooking."

IX

EVERY detail of the pool men's plans was explained to Delaney by Bowie Hoskins. The old lawman kept wishing that Tex was going along. He and the other ranchers would feel safer if he were.

After Chili left, Bowie lagged behind.

"You still think we can trust him, Tex?" he asked anxiously.

"Who?"

"Chili! He's acting funny, Tex. Almighty funny! Maybe he's all right, but that old man of his is sure on the rampage. Juan Cortina still has the idea that us folks is squatting on his land. I didn't tell you this before, because Chili was here. But word drifted down the trail today that some ranchers east of the trail started through with some hides and was raided by Cortina. They was all killed and their hides stolen.

"That's what's worryin' me sick, son. More'n that, Chili disappeared for a couple days. One of the boys cut his trail and reported that it led to Mexico. Putting two and two together we got every reason to believe that Chili went to see his old man. There's trouble afoot, Tex. I feel it, but I'm trying to keep my chin up for the sake of the others. If them hides don't get through we're ruined!"

He left shortly, saying he would return the next day. He didn't mention Starr, nor did Delaney ask about her. Bowie was bearing all the burden one man could carry.

Night fell thick and black. Snow began falling, hurtling through the darkness in great flakes that would soon drift. Delaney, pacing the floor of his cell, suddenly stopped, ice prickling along his nerves. A slight stir outside his cell window stabbed into his senses. Behind the bars a shadow moved. There was a faint clicking sound of steel against steel. Then the shadow was gone.

In one bound Delaney reached the window, his heart hammering wildly. A six-shooter lay there on the sill. Quickly he clutched it up, flipped back the cylinder to examine the loads. There were four bullets in it. It was the gun that Delaney had taken from Strang the night they met in Starr's room!

Delaney went hot and cold all over. If his guess was right Starr had sneaked up to his window just now and left the gun. He stepped to the cell door, bridling the frantic clamoring inside him.

"Guard!" he called quietly.

From the front door came the clump of boot heels along the corridor. Out of the chill gloom appeared a uniformed soldier.

"What do you want, Delaney?" he rapped.

The six-shooter was suddenly in Delaney's white-knuckled fist. His eyes were glowing with deadly intent.

"Make a sound and I'll shoot, bluecoat!" he gritted. "I'm not fooling! Unlock this door and be quick about it. This ain't your fight, feller. It's between Strang and me. Hurry!"

The soldier's eyes flew wide. He must have known he was as near death as he had ever been in his life. A huge key ring jangled in his fumbling fingers. He inserted the proper key, threw back the bolt. The heavy door gave to Delaney's shoulder. There was a dull thumping sound as the barrel of his gun slammed down on the soldier's head.

Delaney caught the man as he fell.

"Hate to do this, feller," he muttered. "But it's the only way."

Swiftly he carried the soldier inside the cell, stripped him of his great coat and service hat. Donning them him-

self, Delaney sped down the corridor to the front door. He opened it, eased cautiously outside, the cocked six-shooter gripped in his fist.

Through the hurtling white curtain of snow and darkness he glimpsed the dim figure of the sentry at the front gate. Across the parade grounds, yellow light glowed in the windows of the officers' quarters, mess hall and barracks.

With his thoughts in a seething turmoil, Delaney darted to the corner of the guardhouse. A pistol shot from the direction of the officers' quarters stopped him. In the darkness he flattened against the log wall as yells pierced the storm. Shadows churned and other men began yelling. The barracks doors burst open and troopers poured outside.

Then a yell, higher than the others, jarred into Delaney's whirling senses like dagger thrusts!

"Good God, men! Captain Strang's been murdered!"

INSTANTLY Delaney saw his chance and took it, his brain afire with rioting emotions. With the confusion in the aroused camp throbbing in his ears, he whirled around the corner of the guardhouse, heading for the brush. The sentry at the front gate dropped flat on the ground, breath bated.

Other soldiers were charging across the dark parade grounds. The sentry spun to meet them. And in that moment Delaney made his bid, leaping to his feet and racing toward the fringe of high black brush. An excited, muffled challenge pierced the uproar behind him. A rifle boomed and questing lead whined close to Delaney.

Through the mesquite and blinding snowfall he ran on, the cocked pistol gripped in his fist. Back of him the muted growl of the Army camp ebbed and flowed. He stayed in the brush, avoiding the wagon road, until the buildings of town loomed up in the night before him.

At the rear of Bottles Lawrence's saloon he paused to fill his bursting lungs. He knew his escape had already been discovered. Somebody had killed Captain Strang and, either purposely or coincidentally, it had been timed just right with Delaney's escape!

Names of those who might have killed Strang flashed through his brain —Starr, Bowie, Chili, several of the pool ranchers who hated the captain. But unless the real murderer was found, Delaney knew that *he* would be blamed for it!

Running on through a narrow lane between two of the buildings, Delaney reached the street front. Saddled horses stood at the hitch-pole in front of the saloon. He made for one of them in long strides, clutched up the reins and hit leather as the horse bolted.

The saloon door opened behind him. A man, limned there against the light inside, yelled. Then soldiers suddenly appeared along the plank walks, spreading the alarm, their strident bawls carrying through the storm-filled night.

"Delaney escaped and killed Cap Strang!"

Delaney left the town behind, his mind groping for an answer to the right course to take. Futile resentment gripped him, for in escaping he had actually plunged himself deeper

into the mire. A killer's bullet had cheated him of choking the truth about his father's murder from Strang, had robbed him of his chance to fulfill his vengeance vow. Everywhere he went now the law would hound him, demanding its penalty.

Disconsolately he turned toward Bowie's ranch, riding hell-for-leather. A half-mile from the oldster's spread he spied the vague outline of a rider on the trail ahead of him. Delaney spurred faster, overtaking the rider. The man suddenly wheeled, a six-shooter flashing into his hand.

"Bowie!" Delaney yelled into the storm.

The old lawman's gun lowered as Delaney reined in close. Amazement jarred him.

"By the leaping flames of hell, Tex!" he shouted. "I thought—"

"Where *you* been, Bowie?" Delaney clipped.

"Town."

"What doing?"

"Dammit, Tex! Let me pop a few questions! The wagon train pulled out an hour ago. I rode with them a ways, then angled back to town to lock up my office. Just left a few minutes ago, heading for home. Then up you popped, scarin' the wits out of me. Quick! How'd you get loose from Stang's lockup?"

Hurriedly Delaney told him everything. Bowie's jaw sagged, a low moan of despair escaping him. And instantly Delaney knew the oldster had had no hand in tonight's tragedy.

"Who could have done it, Tex?" the lawman groaned helplessly.

"We can only guess, Bowie."

"Starr—" Fear was in the oldster's eyes.

"Maybe," Delaney snapped. "Maybe not, Bowie. God knows she had reason enough to want to shoot him, if only from what I've seen and heard. Set tight, keep your mouth shut, and look out for her if they get hot after her. I'm heading for Juan Cortina's settlement."

"Tex! You're not able!"

TEX said shortly, "Able be damned, Bowie. I'm going to do everything possible to see that them wagons get through safe. By going to Cortina's I can find out whether or not he's raiding the trail. Chili was with the wagons, was he?"

"I think so."

"Then do as I say, Bowie. And hold tight!"

Waiting to hear no more protests from the oldster, he wheeled and purred off across the valley, veering far around town and heading on to the south. Shortly before dawn, tired, cold, and depressed, he reached the broad, sluggish river. Crossing into Old Mexico, he made dry camp in a *mogote* of *huajilla* as the new day broke.

For awhile he rested there, giving his horse a breather and a chance to forage off of the tufts of mesquite grass jutting through the snow. The storm roared on, blanketing the ground and surrounding hills in white.

Finally, from his cover of brush, he saw a small group of heavily armed soldiers ride up to the Texas side of the river and stop. They talked for a few moments, then turned back.

Remounting, Delaney followed the angling river on the old Mexico side. Hunger gnawed at his innards. Icy wind whipped through the blue Army coat he was wearing, chilling him to the bone. He was still weak from the ordeal he had been through, but from the deep inner wells of his rawhide toughness he drew the strength to go on.

That afternoon he shot a wild turkey, and in a tangled thicket he roasted it over a small fire, eating his fill. Then, under snow-filled leaden afternoon skies, he forged on. Farther down the river, opposite the Texas trail to Rockport, was the small Mexican settlement where Juan Cortina had taken refuge.

All Delaney knew of the place was what he had heard from Chili, and from the hearsay of others. Since the unfortunate Mier Expedition into

Mexico, few Texans had dared the threat of this wild land. Mexico, in the throes of revolution, was rampant with lawlessness and internal disorder. Mexicans, once powerful owners of vast cattle herds and haciendas, had sought refuge south of the Rio after the fall of the Alamo.

Juan Cortina had been one of these Mexicans. Fierce in his hates and violent in his loves, Cortina had fled to Mexico, cursing the gringo robbers. But Chili, heedless of his father's scorn, had returned to Texas. In this settlement, gossip had it, Juan Cortina had organized his *mozos* and *paisanos*, embittering them against the gringos, giving vent to his spleen by raiding.

Here, according to Chili, Juan Cortina's beautiful Irish wife had died, torn between the love of her fiery Spanish husband and her love for Texas. And here, in this squalid settlement, Juan Cortina had lived his life on alone, dreaming and hating, wanted by Texas law, and an outcast in his own country because of his political ambitions.

His home here was generally known as *Rancho Diablo*. Ranch of the Devil.

That night Delaney made camp in another thicket, warming himself by a small fire. At dawn he was up, riding on, denying himself the rest that his body needed. Toward noon he came within gunshot of a small Mexican village, circled it, and went on.

By evening the snow had stopped falling, but the arctic wind kept blowing. As shadows gloomed the river country Delaney spotted *Rancho Diablo* in a small basin below him. The place tallied exactly with the description Chili had given him. Built of unplastered adobe, a high wall enclosed a scatteration of low-roofed buildings and huts. A small mission stood in the middle, its cross rising above the other buildings.

Boldly Delaney dipped his horse down the hill and rode closer. Wood smoke, the smell of frijoles and garlic, filtered through the thin wintry air. As he approached the open gate a mongrel ran out and snapped at the horse's heels. Black-shawled, whang-leather-skinned women came to the candlelighted windows of the adobe to peer out into the gathering gloom.

KEEN to his danger, Delaney drew up at the doorway of the mission as a black-robed *padre* walked outside. The *padre* stared in unmasked wonder. That reminded Delaney that he was wearing the hated blue coat and hat of the American *soldados*.

"I am hunting Señor Juan Cortina," he said in Spanish. "Can you help me, Father?"

The holy man shook his head. "You come too late, soldier of Texas."

"Why?"

"The Señor Cortina was captured by the Federation six months ago and taken to Mexico City to answer a charge of political treason. There he lies in prison."

"You speak the truth, Father?"

. . "*Padres*, my son, do not lie."

Delaney felt the blood rush to his face. "I did not mean it that way."

The holy man nodded understandingly. "You come alone?"

"Alone."

"Your mission I know not, my son. Nor are your worldly affairs mine. But if you wish to leave here, and live, you had best come with me."

Tides of warning whipped through Delaney. He whirled in the saddle, his blood cold. Tension gripped the small settlement. At the gate behind him leaned a man, eyes glowering in the gloom, gripping a rifle that was half-hidden by his serape. As if by magic other men appeared in the darkened doorways, watching. That hate which Cortina had instilled in them was deep.

The *padre* was waiting. Every nerve taut, Delaney said:

"Thank you, Father."

The holy man showed Delaney to some stables in the rear of the mission. After the horse was cared for they entered the church by a rear door. Back

here the *padre* maintained his living quarters, eating and sleeping here, drinking his red wine, and giving his blessings to the children who sought his companionship during the day.

In his eyes was the love for, and the glory and tragedy of Old Mexico.

X

WHILE the tapers burned, the *padre* set out warm food and wine. Delaney ate heartily, thankful for this haven and a rest. But he knew no peace of mind. A hundred questions plagued him, stirring him with unrest.

"Yes, my son, the Señor Cortina has been in prison in Mexico these past six months," the *padre* repeated, as Tex ate.

And Delaney knew he was hearing the truth. Any raids made on the Texas trail since the Mexican had been taken prisoner had been the work of someone other than Juan Cortina!

Puzzled by his fruitless quest, Delaney lay awake on his pallet for hours that night. He heard the *padre* quietly leave his room and depart by the rear door of the mission. Later he heard the holy man return, and he wondered. At dawn he woke to find the *padre* bending over him.

"It is best that you leave early, my son," he intoned. "The feeling of my people runs high against all Texans."

Delaney understood, and again expressed his thanks. The *padre* had prepared a sack of food for him to take with him. He followed Delaney out to the shed while he rigged and mounted. In the dreary gray light he led the way to the open gate, his fat arm lifted in hail and farewell.

"*Adios*, my son. *Vaya con Dios.*"

"*Con Dios*," Delaney replied gratefully.

He headed straight for the river, realizing that the *padre* had saved his life. His mind was made up. If his guess was right the wagon caravan from Mustang Valley now should be about opposite him on the Texas trail. If luck rode with him he might join the wagon train and see it safely to Rockport. There the young pool men could dispose of their hides and return to the valley with the money.

Delaney felt the full weight of his responsibility for the safety of the wagons. His iron will had forced Bowie and the other disouraged pool men to listen to him. For himself he felt little hope. Branded the murderer of an Army captain, the word would spread. The law, such as it was, would hound him relentlessly. The peace and security he had once hoped for was gone. And hope of unmasking the murderer of his father was like a canker sore that would never heal.

Never once did Delaney abate his vigilance as he rode on northward through the unsettled, brush-filled country. At the river he barely paused. That afternoon it began raining, melting the light skift of snow. The downpour turned the grassy low spots into pools, flooded the gullies.

Soaked to the hide, sick in body and soul, Delaney stopped at dark, building a small fire of dry tinder beneath a shelving rock. He ate sparingly of the food the *padre* had given him, then slept.

It was still raining when he woke at dawn and rode on. At mid-morning he came abruptly out of the brush upon the trail that led to the coast.

Fresh hoof prints, the deep prints of wagon wheels in the mud, told of the wagon train's recent passing. He spurred his horse in hot pursuit. For an hour or more he kept the pace. Then, where the trail dipped down a long straight slope, he spotted the long line of loaded wagons, lurching and trundling through the muck behind the straining teams.

A man was riding guard behind the rear wagon, slicker-clad and armed with a rifle. He heard Delaney's approach and turned. In the blinding downpour he recognized Delaney and his croaking cry of joy broke through the storm.

"Tex! *Por Dios*, my prayers ees

been answer thees time!"

The gun guard was Chili Cortina.

Delaney had little chance to say anything to Chili. The wagons were circling for a brief noonday halt. Teamsters piled down from their loads, striding forward. John Pike's two husky sons, Tom and Clay, greeted Delaney with obvious lack of warmth. They were nervous, ill at ease. It was the same with Newberry's tall, freckle-faced youngster. And the chill of their reception was like a slap in the face.

"Howdy, Tex," each one of them muttered morosely.

THEN Jacques Chaffee was swaggering forward, guns bulging beneath his wet slicker, his boots caked with sticky mud. His black beard partly hid the half-healed scars that he had received in his fight with Delaney. His nose, still swollen and discolored, had set crookedly, giving his face a distorted appearance. His colorless eyes were as cold as those of a week-old dead man.

"Joining us, Delaney?" he rapped queerly. "Or going on before the law nabs you?"

"I'm staying with the wagons as far as Rockport, Chaffee," Delaney said coolly.

"Then?"

Delaney shrugged, stung by his reception. Deep and abiding rage stormed through him, but outwardly he was never calmer. The pool boys stood in silence, watching, awed by the deadly hate and tension they sensed. Nearer the wagons stood the gunman called Chino, his scarred face expressionless, but his eyes missing nothing. With him was another Circle L gunman.

"Word come up the trail that you'd killed Captain Strang and got away," Chaffee said tonelessly. "I'm rodding this outfit and don't aim to have no trouble, Delaney. So far as I'm concerned you can go with us to Rockport. But when we reach there I want no part of you. They's a law, you know, agin harboring criminals."

Chaffee turned on his heel, strode away. And only with effort did Delaney bridle his feelings. Under the impact of the stares of the valley boys, he turned to the wagon that carried his load of hides. The other men returned to their duties. A roaring fire was built in the inner circle. Unloading chuck from the rear wagon, one of the pool youths began cooking a meal.

Delaney went grimly about inspecting his team and wagon, watching for a chance to be alone with Chili. The young Mexican had done a good job of baling the hides. They were stacked high on the flat-bed wagon, held in place with ropes, and covered with a huge tarp.

When the grub call came, Delaney and Chili got their tin plates and cups and joined the other men. Chaffee and his two gunhands stayed to themselves, their furtive eyes missing nothing. Delaney made no effort at conversation, for his acquaintance with the valley boys was slight. They were just kids when he went to war.

Patently they had found Chaffee a hard boss, profane and tough. But unaccountably the Circle L man had won their confidence. Maybe it was fear of him. Whatever it was, Delaney knew Chaffee had cunningly and subtly turned them against him. The grueling work and the constant threat of death had rubbed their nerves raw. They knew horses and cows. They were courageous, clean-cut lads who had jumped at the chance to come, expecting it to be a lark—but had found it more than they'd bargained for.

For the most part they wolfed their food in silence, gulping black coffee from tin cups and exchanging bird-like glances. Fear and weariness showed in their eyes. Their big hats were soaked and shapeless, their boots heavy with mud. Each packed a six-shooter beneath his slicker, but not a one of them could hit a bucket at forty paces. Impulsive kids, they were,

easily swayed and frightened by the burden of their responsibility.

Delaney saw his chance and said to young Clay Pike, "What's in your craw against me, feller?"

The youth scowled darkly. "Nothing."

"Spill it!"

Clay Pike tossed his empty tin plate into the water bucket and spun around, eyes blazing.

"Damn it, Delaney, you ask us what's eating us after what we been through for four days and nights? Mud and rain and snow! Bogging wagons, and Chaffee tellin' us to hurry! Then you come fogging in here with the law on your tail for killing a man. What did you want us to do—kiss you? A feller can stand only so much. And personal, I've had a bellyful. If it wasn't for my folks I'd turn back now!"

"Steady, Clay," Delaney said softly.

"Steady, huh?" the boy raged. "Don't talk to me like I was a yearling! I'll fight anything with hair or claws, but this waiting, waiting is driving us loco! This morning we passed what was left of two wagons after Juan Cortina struck. They was in ashes, the horses dead, and what was left of two men when the wolves got through."

CLAY swung to face Chili Cortina before Delaney could stop him. "You might as well know how us boys feel about you, too, Chili! We sure ain't tickled because you're along. Maybe you ain't bad, but your old man is a back-stabbing Mexican. He killed them two men along the trail, robbed 'em of their cowhides, packed 'em on his own horse and got away!"

The other valley boys stood glowering, in complete accord with Pike's furious outburst. Chili's swart face was a battle-ground of mixed emotions.

"Get a grip on yourself, Clay!" Delaney rapped. "I've seen bigger men than you crack on the trail before now, but don't let it get you! I don't know who made that raid on the two men you saw dead this morning, but I *do* know it wasn't Juan Cortina!"

"And how," a smirking voice behind him said, " do you know that, jailbird?"

Delaney whirled. Chaffee, his slicker pulled back and both thumbs hooked in his sagging gunbelts, faced him. Spotted strategically off to one side stood Chino, beady eyes glowing with killer lust. Near the wagons hovered the other Circle L gunman.

Gun-trap! Delaney saw it and his blood leaped hot. From the valley boys he could expect no help. But outwardly he was as cold as ice.

"The reason I know, Chaffee," he said, "is because I just came from Juan Cortina's *rancho*. Cortina has been in prison in Mexico City for the past six months."

"Hogwash, Delaney!" the wagon boss grated. "That's soup to me and mighty thin! If it's a snake's game you and the Mexican are playing with his old man's raiders it'd better be good. We're keeping our eyes on you from here on. Make one crooked move and we'll shoot both of you! Remember that, boys. Now back to your wagons."

Delaney struggled for control as the sullen valley boys tramped through the rain to their wagons. When he turned and strode toward his own team, Chili trailed after him like a man dazed by the sudden turn of affairs.

"Tie our horses to the rear of the wagon, Chili," Delaney said huskily. "I'll tool the team. Ride with me. There's plenty I want to talk over with you."

Chaffee and Chino, riding at the head of the wagons, shouted back orders for the caravan to roll. Atop their load, with Chili at his side, Delaney started his team. The wagon groaned into motion, the high wheels creaking and grinding through the deep gumbo mud.

Chili sat fingering an old rifle. He kept staring dejectedly ahead through the downpour.

"Now what weel we do, Tex?" he finally said.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, Chili. Chaffee is cleverer than I gave him credit for being. He's playin' a game I can't quite *sabe*."

"You said my father ees een preeson. Ees that true?"

"That's gospel, Chili."

Delaney told the little Mexican all that had been going on since his escape from the guardhouse. Of his visit to *Rancho Diablo* and his talk with the *padre*.

"In my own mind that clears your father of much of the deviltry that's been laid to him, Chili. But proving that he's innocent of these crimes is something else."

Chili was silent for a long time. "What do you aim to do, *compadre?*"

Delaney's beard-stubbled face was bitter. "I don't know. If I can live long enough to help put the valley pool men in the clear I reckon my chore will be done—Say, Chili, I heard you high-tailed into Mexico for a couple of days before the wagons left. Why did you do it?"

Chili looked at Delaney quickly. "Who told you?"

"Bowie Hoskins."

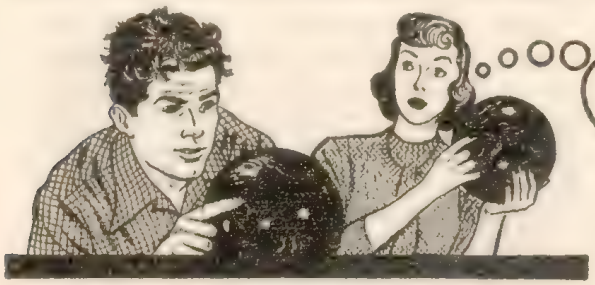
Chili nodded his admission. "I deed, Tex. I sneaks across the line."

"To see your father?"

"No. Remember me wan time talkeeng of Maria Gomez? She weeth thee beeg eyes and thee so red leeps. I founda her still weeth her father on thee leetle *rancho* across the Rio from Mosquero. Some day we have the hopes of being marry. But I tell her that's can wait."

DELANEY vaguely remembered the señorita who had given her love to Chili. She and her aged father

[*Turn page*]



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had come to Mosquero the night before Chili and Delaney had left for war.

After that both men were silent, prey to the same evil foreboding.

When the wagon behind them sank to the hubs and stuck, they were first to lend help. In the mud and bitter cold they pushed and toiled.

Chaffee rode back, cursing and fuming at the delay.

"Hurry up there, you greenhorns!" he bawled. "Shove the wagon free, and keep an eye peeled for them bogs after this. At this rate we won't hit Rockport till next summer!"

"Cut her to the right, Newberry," Delaney told the frightened, bewildered youth.

The boy glared down the load, eyes hot with rebellion. "Don't tell *me* what to do, Delaney! You're not the boss around here!"

Delaney's temper flopped over. "Maybe not," he fired back. "But for your dad's sake I want to see you get through safe and hide-whole!"

XI

GRUMBLING, cursing, the Newberry boy, warned by what he saw in Delaney's eyes, set about the task as Tex advised. The wagon came out of the mire. But that night at supper the undercurrent of suspicion which Chaffee had built up in those boys showed strongly. They avoided him and Chili, eating alone, muttering boorishly among themselves.

Toward these boys Delaney felt only sympathy. But nothing he could do or say would change them. With devilish cunning Chaffee had played upon their overwrought nerves and fears, knowing they were just gullible boys. Now, fired with suspicion and unrest, they were liable to do anything rash.

Soaked and miserably cold, Delaney turned to his wagon when the cheerless meal was finished. Chili handed him a spare blanket and crawled beneath the load with him. The little Mexican unstrapped the holstered gun and cartridge belt he had been wearing beneath his slicker.

"Take these, Tex. I gots thee rifle. That seexgun you have only has a few loads. Thees way you have plenty."

Delaney accepted the old .44 six-shooter, strapped it about his waist. He laid aside the army Colt that had been slipped into his prison window. Then he rolled up in the blanket. So intent was he with his morbid thoughts he didn't see or hear Chili crawl out from beneath the wagon and disappear.

Except for the whining wind and pelting downpour the camp grew quiet. The sizzling drops beat down upon the campfire, dulling its red glow. Chaffee, making it a point to avoid Delaney's wagon, made the rounds of the camp, appointing men to stand guard. Chino and the two new valley ranchers stalked out into the surrounding brush to take the first shift.

Delaney closed his eyes, aching in every muscle. Some time later he sat up with a start, every nerve on edge. Turning, he saw Chili's empty blanket. Then voices, muffled and eerie, filtered through the rainy darkness from one of the wagons ahead.

Near Delaney's wagon a stick snapped. A crouched shadow moved. Gun in hand, Delaney flattened, tense, eyes on the blurry shape that kept creeping closer. Then Chili's warning whisper suddenly leaped out of the gloom at him, and the Mexican was at his side, his dark face wet with rain and working with excitement.

"Tex, come queeck! Chaffee ees sending two of the boys back to thee valley. Eet looks bad. Bad! Come weeth me."

He led the way, squirming along on the muddy ground with all the stealth and quiet of an Indian. Along the line of wagons both men eased nearer the sound of low voices. The campfire had died to a smoldering bed of ashes, shedding a weird glow over the inner circle.

In the darkness Chili stopped,

waited until Delaney dragged up alongside him. Beneath the wagon nearest them the dim shapes of several huddled figures were discernible. Chaffee's raspy whisper suddenly came clear.

"Delaney and that Mexican are up to no good. We might as well face facts. Both of 'em have got prison records. And the law is hot on Delaney for killing that Army captain. Chino told me awhile ago he heard 'em plottin'. My guess is they plan to hold us up and take every hide. Maybe old Cortina is in on the deal. I don't know."

"Gosh, Chaffee," the McPherson youth, Sandy McPherson's young brother, croaked, "Delaney surely ain't that bad. He surely—"

"Don't be blind, Mac! It's all of us agin them two, but if Cortina is backing 'em the odds is in their favor. We're going to need help and need it bad. You, Clay Pike, you and your brother are sneaking out of here tonight. Kill your horses getting back to the valley. Tell Hoskins and the others we need help. Tell 'em we're afraid Delaney and the Mexican are plotting to steal our loads. There's a small fortune in them hides. And your folks will be ruined if we don't get through."

A RAGING, fierce urge to call to Chaffee, give him a chance to defend himself, then down him with lead filled Tex Delaney. But he knew that the Valley boys, already terrified, would side Chaffee. Some of them would die, and no kind of explanations could ever clear Delaney's name.

So, signaling to Chili, Delaney squirmed back to his own wagon. In a low whisper, hoarse with passion, he said:

"They're believing Chaffee, Chili!—Swallering his bait, hook, line and sinker. Nothing we can do will stop 'em. They're scared silly. If we call for a showdown they'll have us bested. When Clay and Tom sneak out of camp, you trail 'em. Down the backtrail a piece, catch up with them and try to pound some sense into their heads. If they're still bent on going back to the valley with Chaffee's cock and bull story of our treachery, go with them!"

"But you, Tex?"

"I'm sticking with the wagons, Chili—no matter what. These hides have got to get through! I'll take care of myself—There go the two boys towards the horses. Get going, Chili. And *vaya con Dios, compadre!*"

Chili's protests were never uttered. Like a shadow he darted away, vanishing into the black mantel of night. Delaney flattened on his blanket, six-shooter in his fist, pulse hammering at his temples. Again he struggled with the terrible urge to face Chaffee and his two gunmen and demand a showdown. It was bound to come sooner or later. But again better judgment held him.

Out of the night came the furtive whisper of hoofbeats. Then the faint sound of men turning in for the night. After that silence except for the moan of the wind and the steady rainfall.

Delaney knew that sleep was out of the question. His mind galloped with a hundred maddening thoughts and plans. Chaffee, his two gunmen, young Newberry and McPherson, and the two new valley ranchers were all who were here now. They would be terribly shorthanded when they went on in the morning. One of the wagon teams would have to be hitched behind the wagon in front.

An hour dragged past. Delaney rolled and tossed, his mind still churning. Then, suddenly, two quick gunshots from the outer fringe of brush stabbed his nerves. On the heels of them came the blare of a gun from one of the wagons ahead. One of the valley boys screamed in mortal terror. A man cursed. Then the screaming boy was out from beneath his wagon, springing across the inner circle toward Delaney, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

"Delaney! Delaney! Help! Good

God, Chino turned his gun on McPherson—killed him!"

It was the Newberry boy, unarmed and running. In mid-stride his body jarred as lead smashed into him from the flaming gun at his back. He sprawled, a lifeless heap, as Delaney came out of his blanket. Trouble had reared its ugly head. Death was the answer.

A gun-barrel jabbed into Delaney's back. He spun, stricken by the knowledge that he was too late. Chaffee stepped back, facing him, his colorless eyes bright with deadly intent. Then Chino, his scarred and ugly face twitching, stalked up with the other gunman.

"This is as far as you go up the trail, Delaney!" Chaffee snarled. "Us three are taking the hides on through —with maybe a little help. The valley boys are dead. I was saving you for myself. When them Pike boys and the valley men get here they'll find only ashes and bodies. It's like Lamont ordered, *sabe?* But you'll be the one that done it—you and Cortina!"

Delaney's voice was a throaty whisper. "You doublecrossing snakes!"

Chaffee's six-shooter roared and Delaney flung himself to one side, his own gun flaming as he dived toward the ground. In that breath of time everything came clear, and he cursed the men whose vicious treachery had ruined a rangeland and his name.

Lead tore into Delaney's chest as he rolled, fighting desparately to regain his feet. But he cursed and killed. Grimly he strove to down Chaffee, but the wagon boss leaped back to cover, evading bullets.

THROUGH the swirling smoke and dimness Delaney saw Chino's tall body stiffen, spin and fall as lead smashed into his face. A gunman named Silver was on his knees, one arm limp from another of Delaney's bullets that had found a mark.

Then the strength poured from Delaney and he fell, as oblivion claimed him.

Chaffee, smoking pistol clenched in his fist, huddled near one of the wagons as the surrounding hills tossed back the echoes. His thick lips pulled back over his teeth in what he meant for a grin, but the cringing fear of a coward was in his eyes. He kept staring at the bodies. Chino was dead. He hadn't meant for Chino to die. Silver, tall and thin, was reeling to his feet, clutching a bloody arm.

"We done her, Silver," Chaffee said shakily.

"Sure, but Chino's dead," Silver grumbled.

Chaffee pulled himself erect. He looked a little sick and his swagger was gone, but he didn't want Silver to know he was afraid.

"Don't like this kind of business, Chaffee," Silver was saying. "'Fraid we'll never get away with it. You should have just up and shot Delaney like we did them other fellers, without all that talk. Chino wouldn't have been killed if you'd done that."

"Shut up, Silver," Chaffee rasped. "You're getting good pay for this, and to keep your mouth shut. Make sure Delaney's dead, then tote his body back in the hills somewheres and bury it beneath a cut-bank. We'll fix them other bodies so's it'll look like the fellers died fighting. I'm riding on up the line to meet the other hands. Lamont and them was s'posed to be camped near Knob Hill. That's where they was s'posed to raid us. But I figured my way would be quicker and easier. We're going to have to hurry to get the job done."

Chaffee saddled his horse and left, relieved to get away. Silver had no stomach for his chore. He didn't like to be around dead men. Iike all gunmen, he was superstitious. Grumbling, he bandaged his own wounded arm with his bandanna, and loaded Delaney's limp body over the back of Chino's horse. Leading the animal, he walked through a gully in the hills to the southward.

He went a mile or so, through the brush and drizzling rain. Once he

stopped, gun in hand, listening as something moved in the mesquite near him. Into his slow-working mind came terror. He wasn't afraid of facing men with guns. It was the darkness and the hurt of his wound that got him now.

"I ain't afraid," he mumbled. "Ain't afraid."

But he was. And it was an unholy fear that shook him to the depths of his cowardly soul. In a tangled thicket he stopped again. He heard something, and turned in time to see Delaney's limp body slide to the ground from the horse's slippery back.

Silver waited to see no more. He started back toward the trail, running part of the way. No one would ever find Delaney's body or the horse back there in the thicket. When Chaffee asked Silver about the job, Silver would lie. Sure, he'd tell Chaffee he buried the body. And nobody would ever know. Not even if the bones were found years from now. . . .

Delaney awoke with the wintery sun in his eyes, chill, stiff and with his feverish body one vast hurt. Insects hummed and buzzed around him in the brush. Dazedly he stared at the blood on his shirt front. His tongue was swollen. Thirst was like a fiend, pricking his throat with tiny spears.

With much effort he sat up, staring dazedly out of pain-shot eyes at the unsaddled horse with trailing reins. The animal was only a few feet away, but it took the last iota of Delaney's strength to reach him. Twice he fell, trying to climb astride, before he finally succeeded. Then he got the horse in motion.

He had no idea where the horse was taking him. His head was slumped on his chest. Some time later he became conscious of someone jabbering in Spanish, lifting him down to the ground and dragging him inside a mud hut. It was a Mexican who stretched him out on a blanket and began examining the bullet-hole through his shoulder.

"You are a man of iron, Señor," he whispered in Spanish. "Else you would have died before now. But I fear you are done."

"I can't die," Delaney said weakly.

"That is for *Dios* to say."

"Then I'll live. I've got to live to kill a man."

Gato Gutierrez, who herded goats along the river, shook his head wearily. To him gringos would forever remain a mystery. . . .

CHRISTMAS came and passed. The furious winter storms of the Brasada became fewer and fewer. Two months had gone by since the fateful night of Captain Strang's murder. Tragedy and ruin had struck in Mustang Valley, but there would be more bloodshed before it was over. That was the word that passed from lip to lip.

Wild cattle that had escaped capture were in the hills for anyone to brand. But still no trail herds were made up for shipping. Cattle still were worth just what their hides would bring on the market at the hide and tallow factories along the Gulf Coast. Freighting them there safely was the problem.

Jacques Chaffee, working under Pierre Lamont's orders, hired more men. Twice, under heavy guard, he and his men braved the hazardous trail to Rockport with Circle L hides, sold them and returned safely. But the small pool ranchers, broke, discouraged and bitter, never made the gamble again.

"Old Cortina is afraid to attack me now," Chaffee boasted in Bottles Lawrence's saloon one night. "I learned my lesson. Damn him, let him strike, and my men will cut him down and sell *his* hide in Rockport! Too bad the other ranchers ain't got money like Lamont, so's they can fight the thing through."

Two weeks before, a small rancher at the head of Brave Creek in Mustang Valley, had been raided. The raiders had come smashing out of the night from the south, yelling and

shooting. The rancher, a man by the name of Meade, had not stood a chance. He, his wife and small son had been murdered. Their few head of stock had been killed, their cabin and outbuildings burned.

Bowie Hoskins, Chaffee, and several ranchers had reached the scene too late to give help. The raiders were gone, leaving death and destruction behind. The ranchers had trailed the raiders to the river and had seen where they had crossed into Mexico.

They were certain it had been Cortina's band. They were equally certain the same horrible fate awaited them in this God-forsaken land.

"I'm through now, boys," Sandy McPherson said, gaunt face working. "I ain't thinking of myself. It's Ma and my daughter, Sarah. There's just the three of us left now, and I can't see them two die. We're leaving for some place where we can find peace and security."

He was the first to speak what was in the minds of them all.

XII

FALSE-FRONTED buildings in Mosquero seemed to sag all the more, as if succumbing to the mystery and evil and rottenness of their surroundings. All through the town there was a tenseness in the air that once had been clean. People looked out of half-open doors before they went into the street. Women no longer ventured out alone down to the general store to do their buying.

It was the waiting that brought hysteria. That endless waiting for the end to come. When Chaffee and his gun-hung Circle L hands roared into town the place was theirs. In their belligerence they profanely defied the hand of the law.

On occasion Pierre Lamont rode into town with his men, as he did this night. This time he did a little drinking in Bottles's saloon. When he talked other men fell silent.

"Give them what they want, Bottles," he said, in his booming way, "and charge it to me. Now that the Army has pulled out my word will be law around here. You understand that?"

He wasn't the suave Frenchman he had been when the valley folks had first known him. Reveling in his own power, he liked to see men cringe under his cold stare. He had a way of smiling with his lips when there was no smile in his eyes at all.

"Sure, I understand, Mr. Lamont," Bottles said meekly.

"I'm glad, Bottles," Lamont told him smiling. "I don't want any more trouble in this valley. Delaney doing what he did to us, and Cortina raiding us is enough. "

"Seems that way."

"Things will be different one of these days."

"I guess so, Mr. Lamont."

"I plan to make one big ranch out of Mustang Valley now."

"The hell you say!"

"Too bad about the other ranchers."

"I'll say so."

When Lamont, Chaffee and the other men tramped outside to their horses and rode out of town, and Bottles was left alone, he felt the same fears that were rife among the townspeople. Except for the Circle L hands his trade had waned to nothing.

Bottles had a huge red nose and beady little eyes in a fat face. He had a vivid imagination, and the slight swagger of a little man who tries to cover up his own physical weakness. Folks figured he wasn't much smarter than the law allowed, but he had sense enough to make money out of the saloon business when times were good.

Two fingers on his left hand were missing. He used to boast that he had lost them in the Civil War. What he kept to himself was that he actually had lost them trying to get out of a crap game alive years ago in Galveston.

This night Bottles poured himself a drink. He took several to quiet the

fluttering fear in his heart. He heard the creak of wagon wheels a little later and went to the window. A covered wagon was stopping outside. It was loaded with household furniture —and fear. A milk cow and calf were tied to the tail-gate. On the spring seat was Sandy McPherson and the huddled, tragic figures of his wife and daughter.

McPherson drew the team to a stop, climbed down and came inside. Bottles set out the whisky and refused to take any money. McPherson seemed to be cracking under the deadly poison of his own hate and sorrow. He had never recovered from the shock of the death of his younger brother.

After drinking, he wiped off his grizzled chin. "This'll be my last, Bottles," he said unsteadily. "Me'n Ma and Sarah is pulling out tonight."

"Lamont pay you anything for your land, Mac-"

"Stole it, damn him! Stole the very heart out of us for two bits an acre. But there was no other way, Bottles. It was that or starve."

"Where you goin' now, Mac?"

"Don't know. Only, God willin', we'll find some place west of here where maybe we can find peace. *Adios*, Bottles."

BOTTLES tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but failed. He watched McPherson depart and heard the creak of the wagon wheels, and something went out of his life forever. In a quavering whisper of anguish he said aloud:

"Why did he do it? Why did he? I never figured Tex Delaney was that kind of a skunk."

Silence crept over the town. The blood-red moon shone down like a blighted benediction until storm clouds covered it and the night got dark. Distant thunder began rumbling, growing louder with the suddenness of an early spring storm. Smell of mesquite filled the still air.

Bottles listened. He heard slow hoofbeats that came to a stop outside his door. Spurs jingled faintly. Then the door opened and a tall, keen-eyed man entered. There was something different about him from most men. He had a slow, gentle way of speaking and eyes that seemed to look clear through a man.

"I'm L. H. McNelly," he said quietly.

Bottles gulped. "The devil—er—I mean not Captain McNelly of the Rangers?"

"The same, friend. Now I'd like to ask some questions. "

"You mean—"

"Tell me what you know about Tex Delaney."

Bottles swallowed hard, but obeyed. He told of the bushwhackings as he had heard about them, mentioned Juan Cortina and Chili, recounted the story of Captain Strang's murder and Delaney's escape from the guardhouse. Not long afterward, he said, the Army Post had been removed, and the soldiers had left the vicinity.

Bottles explained how, that dreary night in December, the two Pike boys had returned from the wagon train to the valley on lathered horses. With them had come Chili, trying to get a word in edgewise, but with nobody listening to him. The Pike boys had told of Delaney joining the wagon train and how they were suspicious of him. Chaffee had told them that one of his men had overheard Delaney and Chili plotting to steal the hides.

Stunned by this news, Bowie Hoskins and the other valley men had taken to the trail. They had ridden day and night, but had got there too late. They had found some of the wagons burned, and the remaining valley boys with their bodies full of bullet-holes. Chino had been dead among them. They had found horse tracks showing where raiders, apparently, had swooped down on the camp from the north.

Dumb-struck by the brutality of it all, the valley men had buried the bodies and gone on. They had found Chaffee and a gent named Silver, who had been wounded, at Lamont's hide

and tallow factory in Rockport. Those two had managed to escape, but were scared witless. It was a ghastly story they told of mutiny and death.

When the raiders had struck, they declared Delaney had turned on his own valley men. With the help of the raiders Delaney had doubled the load of some of the wagons, burned the others. He and some of the raiders had driven like mad on into Rockport. There, to a clerk at Lamont's plant, they had sold their hides, collected the money and vanished. After checking with the clerk to make certain that Delaney *had* collected the money, the valley men had returned home, broke and ruined.

"It was an awful shock to them, Captain," Bottles said mournfully. "They'd have trusted Delaney with their very souls, I reckon. Always seemed like an upright feller to me. But you never know. Never know. Well, when the valley men come back there was nothing for 'em to do but sell and get out, or starve. Some of them have sold and gone. Others are trying to tough it out. Lamont has money. He could stand the loss. He's been buying up land since then at two bits an acre. It's rocky times in Texas, Captain McNelly. Rocky times."

"And this Chili Cortina. Where did he go?"

"He's still out at Delaney's Horseshoe Ranch. Some of the valley men wanted to hang him, but Bowie Hoskins stopped 'em. Reckon you couldn't blame Chili if his old man is a killing Mexican."

"And Starr Hoskins, who married Captain Strang?"

"Closed the restaurant, there being no trade. She's still here, they tell me, livin' in the back of the place. But word is that she's leaving for St. Louis."

CAPTAIN McNelly said grimly, "There's a new brand of law coming to the Brasada, Bottles. Ranger law! I've combed the trail from here to Rockport and checked in adjoining states to find trace of Tex Delaney, but it seems like he's vanished from the earth. I'm not giving up, though, till he's found. You're in a position here to help me. I'm going to swear you in for special duty."

"Hell!" Bottles beamed. "Think of that! Me a Ranger. Always wanted to be one, I did. Ranger Lawrence!"

They talked in low tones, neither of them turning as a buckboard rattled past outside. Captain McNelly gave Bottles his instructions. The little barkeep nodded vigorously.

When Captain McNelly left the saloon, he went out to his horse at the hitch-rack, mounted, and rode toward the Horseshoe Ranch. . . .

The rumbling thunder grew louder over the valley, like the echo of gunfire that everyone was certain was bound to come. Dismal lamplight glowed from the windows of the Horseshoe ranch house. Two buckboards and some saddled horses stood in the front yard.

Inside the living room Bowie Hoskins sat in a straight-backed chair, his shoulders bent, his sunken eyes staring hopelessly. Across from him sat Sam Whitehead, owner of the general store, and Doc Tidwell, whose stringy neck seemed thinner.

Parson Cripps stood in the center of the room, Bible in hand, his soulful eyes upon the two people who faced him. One of them was Chili Cortina, his boots tallowed and his faded overalls washed and ironed. At his side stood an attractive Mexican girl, dressed in white and wearing a veil.

"I'm not of your faith, Chili," Parson Cripps intoned, "Nor of Miss Gomez's. But if it is your wish that I marry you, it shall be done."

"Eet ees my weesh," said Chili. "And Maria's."

Parson Cripps had heard Chili say earlier that this was the way Tex Delaney would have wanted it. And the long-legged parson was accustomed to strange sentiment among Mexicans.

"You two are here tonight to join in holy wedlock—"

His voice droned on and on, the lamplight playing over Cripps' sad face and reflected in the eyes of the witnesses who were standing now.

"You take this woman, Chili Cortina, to be your lawful wedded wife, to hold and cherish, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

"*Si.* I do."

"And you, Maria Gomez, do you take this man as your lawful, wedded husband, to honor and obey—"

A tear dropped from her cheek. Her full red lips quivered as she nodded and whispered:

"*Si*, señor. I do."

Parson Cripps concluded in a husky whisper. He closed the Bible and touched the bride's forehead with his lips, pronouncing his blessing. The men shook Chili's hand.

"Good luck, Chili," each said, and one added, for all, "We ain't holding nothing agin you."

When the newly married couple got ready to go, Chili faced the group of men. He tried to keep the tremble out of his voice, but it was hard.

"Maria and I weel live weeth her father across the Line," he said. "Bowie, I leave thees ranch weeth you to do as you please. I—we thank you all *por* comin' to our weddings tonight. Some day we weel ride back. P'raps. And some day, Señors, by the holy saints, you weel believe me when I say that Tex Delaney ees eennocent!"

"*Adios*, Chili," the men murmured. "*Adios*, Maria."

They walked out to the gallery as Chili hurried his bride to the waiting buckboard. He and Maria waved as they drove away, with the thunder growing louder and louder and lightning flashing through the thickening heavens.

Chili drove hard, bundling Maria in the old slicker he had brought along. At the river, Maria's father and her many cousins had promised to meet them. In the great dining hall of the Gomez *hacienda* there would be barbecued beef and wine, feasting and celebrating until noon the next day.

Chili would have a chance to forget his ugly memories for a few hours. He would drink the red wine and sing the old Irish ditties that his mother had taught him.

XIII

UPON reaching Mosquero Chili Cortina drove past the lighted window of Bottles Lawrence's saloon. Before the false-front of the Lone Star Restaurant he stopped the team, leaped to the ground. As he was lifting Maria from the buckboard seat he saw a tall man leave from the saloon, mount his horse and ride away.

"Come, Maria *chiquita,*" he whispered.

They hurried around to the rear where Starr lived. Shades were drawn at the windows, but thin slivers of lamplight escaped beneath them. Chili pecked lightly on the door. When it opened Starr stood framed in the dismal block of light. On the bed behind her lay her packed carpet-bag. She was dressed for traveling, with a small bonnet half framing the pale beauty of her face.

"Come in, Chili." She smiled wanly. "And you, Maria. God bless you both."

They entered her room, closing the door behind them. Chili fumbled with his hat, looking at Starr, and looking away. He found it hard to express himself.

"We wanted to tell you *adios,* Starr," he said.

"I was waiting, Chili," Starr replied, smiling.

"You steel plan to leave?"

"On the midnight stage for San Antonio, Chili. From there I'll go to St. Louis. It's the only way. There's nothing for me here. I hate this place with all my heart and soul. In St. Louis I'll find happiness—and forget." Starr paused, then her steady gaze met the little Mexican's. "Only one thing before we part, Chili."

"And that?"

"Did you kill Captain Strang that night?"

"I—"

"I want the truth, Chili. It makes no difference to me now, but I want the truth. Somehow I'll never make myself believe that Tex did it."

Chili's head was shaking, and the truth lay in his eyes.

"I am mos' positive Tex did not do eet, Starr, Nor deed I. Remember that night I came to see you. We were so worry. You show me thee gon that had belong to Strang. We talk eet over. Then I sleep the gon into thee weendow of his cell and ron. Tex, he deed not have time to get to Strang and keel heem. But no wan would leesten to me."

"I believe you, Chili. I just wanted to make certain. It's something I'll never understand. It's like them saying that Tex murdered those men on the trail and escaped with the hide money. I'll never believe that, either."

"I know," Chili said sadly. "I know."

"You didn't tell Dad that I was leaving tonight, did you?"

Chili shook his head.

"I'm glad, Chili. I haven't got the strength to face Dad. I'm a coward, I guess. I want to get away without him knowing it. In St. Louis maybe I can get work and make enough money to help him and the kids."

Starr's eyes were moist when she told Chili and Maria good-by. She returned to the bed and sat down, waiting for midnight, listening to the roll of thunder. . . .

Out at the Horseshoe ranch house, Bowie, Parson Cripps, Doc Tidwell and Sam Whitehead heard the same approaching storm. Memories, ugly, unpleasant, tortured them. They looked at one another and looked away. They tried to hide their feelings, but the feelings were too strong and were there for all to see. Finally Bowie went to the kitchen. When he returned he was holding a jug and several tin cups.

"Chili told me to take it with us," he said. "It's some whisky that old Frank left behind. Let's have a drink, then go. Getting late."

They all drank, except Parson Cripps. He watched them with all the pitiable sadness of a man whose faith is all but crumbling.

"You men planning to leave the valley?" he asked.

Bowie wiped his lips. "McPherson and that new family have gone, Parson. But me, I'm staying. Me and some of the other men are going to stay. If I'm ruined I want to die fighting. This is my home here. It's worth dying for."

"Amen," Parson Cripps said reverently.

THEY heard it then. A ghostly sound of hoofbeats that came on and on. In minutes more boot heels clumped on the gallery. Spurs jangled. Every man in the room had his eye on the door. The knob began turning and the heavy door opened. A man stood there.

Bowie's half-filled tin cup fell clattering to the floor. If Frank Delaney had risen from the grave and confronted him he could not have been more shocked. In a ghostly whisper of amazement and gladness, he said:

"Tex!"

Delaney stood framed against the black night outside. Not the clean-shaven, bitter-eyed brushpopper who had ridden out of Mosquero with the law on his trail, but a great-bearded, sunken-eyed scarecrow of a man with fists for mauling. His coat and pants were faded and torn, his boots worn and shapeless. About his lean waist was strapped an old six-shooter.

"Tex!" Bowie repeated incredulously. "Where—"

"I'll explain later, Bowie. Where's Lamont? And Chaffee?"

"Why—why, they're at the Circle L, I reckon."

"No they're not, Bowie. I've been watching their ranch for the past hour."

"Tex!" Bowie fairly shouted. "In God's name, man, what's happened?"

They were all standing, staring. Delaney had started to say something when he saw that they were staring beyond him. He whirled as a gun was jabbed into his ribs. A tall man with keen eyes said in a grim, slow way:

"Just hold whatever you have to say, Delaney, for the court to hear. I want you for murder!"

There was no chance to escape. Delaney saw that. Beyond his captor he glimpsed Bottles Lawrence, face pale and a big gun in his trembling fist.

"Who are you?" Tex demanded of the tall man.

"I'm Captain McNelly of the Rangers, Delaney, sent here to clear up the damnedest mess I ever put my foot into. For a week now I've been under cover around here, figuring that you might come back here some day. I'd hate like hell to kill you, cowboy. But I will if you make one wrong move. Now come on! Get on your horse."

Delaney had heard of this famous manhunter. He knew that here was no glory-hunter, but a rock-jawed man who believed in every letter of the law. To buck him was hopeless. Making him listen to the truth was Delaney's only chance.

In a sudden rush of emotion, Delaney burst out, "*Bueno,* Ranger, I'll go with you. But you're going to listen to *my* story. I came back here for only one reason—to kill Pierre Lamont and Chaffee, two of the lowest snakes that ever ruined a range!"

Captain McNelly smiled tolerantly. "I'll be glad to listen to your story, Delaney," he said coldly. "In my headquarters in town. If you can prove your statements there'll be other arrests made pronto. Come on."

Quickly the Ranger removed Delaney's gun from its holster. Not knowing the temper of the other men in the house, he hurried Delaney out of the house. Bowie and Sam Whitehead started to follow, but Captain McNelly ordered them back.

"Sorry, gents," he barked firmly. "I was ordered to make this a secret investigation. And such it will be. Without even you, Sheriff Hoskins. If I need any of you for witnesses, you'll be called—All right, Delaney. Head for Mosquero, and ride slow. Bottles and I will be right behind you with our guns. Get going!"

Delaney set the pace, shaking with the terrible knowledge that he had blundered into the hands of the law. McNelly would never believe his story of Chaffee's grisly treachery. McNelly would want proof. And that Delaney could never get until he was given a free hand to obtain proof in his own way.

Temptation to make a run for it assailed him. But some thread of better judgment held him. For long days at the Mexican herder's hut, hovering between life and death, hate had kept him alive. After that, waiting for the strength to return to Mustang Valley, he had suffered all the tortures of hell, waiting, praying for the chance to clear his name. Now—

HE TRIED to quiet the raging turmoil in him. His only hope lay in winning McNelly to his side before he was spirited out of the country to stand trial. Questions plagued him, but he held his tongue.

It was one of the toughest ordeals of Delaney's life, that trip into Mosquero. McNelly and Bottles rode behind him, their six-shooters trained on his back. Thunder kept up the cannonading, the hills flinging back the echoes. Then a brisk wind came up, smelling of rain.

Mosquero lay dark, quiet, like something dead. Back of the old two-story Commercial House, McNelly guided his prisoner. Before the drought and war it had been a thriving tavern. Since then it had gone to rack and ruin. Weeds had grown through the cracks of the rotten porch planks. Some of the front windows were broken, and dust lay thick inside it.

At McNelly's low order they dismounted, trailing reins. With his gun in Delaney's back, the Ranger captain nodded toward some ancient out-

side stairs.

"Up them, Delaney!" he ordered. "And hurry."

There was no alternative but to do as he was told. Delaney mounted the steps, the two men at his back. On the landing, Bottles stepped in front of him, shoved open a creaking door. A gust of foul, musty air greeted them. Shadows moved. In a blinding flash of weird light two other men took shape.

"That you, Cap?" a voice challenged.

"And with Tex Delaney himself, Dawson. Light the lantern."

Lanternlight suddenly shoved back the inky shadows. A long corridor opened up before Delaney. A door stood open to his right. The gun in his back prodded him through it into a small, dusty room. The man with the lantern placed it on a box. In one corner three blankets had been spread.

The two men who had been waiting for McNelly stared hard at Delaney. Bottles stood in one corner of the room, his six-shooter dangling in his hand at his side.

"You're probably wondering about a good many things, Delaney," McNelly said grimly. "Let me start off by telling you that you're going to be treated fair. These two men here are Rangers from my company. We've been living up here in secrecy for a week, watching, gathering all the information possible. Bottles here was sworn in for special duty."

That's right!" Bottles beamed.

"I'll do the talking, Bottles!" McNelly reprimanded.

"Sure, sure, Cap."

"Now, Delaney, what were you saying about Lamont and his foreman, Chaffee?"

Delaney stood rigid. Beyond the men watching him were two windows, covered tightly with heavy blankets. From somewhere he thought he caught a faint whisper of sound.

"Lamont," he said, voice brittle, "and Chaffee are behind the raids here in Mustang Valley. That I'm sure of. And under Lamont's orders, Chaffee and his killers gunned me on the trail, left me for dead."

"Then you claim you didn't go on into Rockport, sell the hides and abscond with the money—that you had no hand in the raid on the wagon train?"

It all came clear to Delaney, with the force of a smashing blow in the stomach.

"Damn it, man—no!" he said huskily.

"Did you kill Captain Strang?" McNelly fired at him.

"No!"

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

"But you and Chili Cortina did escape from military prison together?"

"Yes."

"Delaney," McNelly said grimly, "I'd like to believe your story. Somehow I don't believe you could stoop to the rotten deeds you're blamed for. I'm going ahead with this investigation until I'm plumb satisfied. But in the meantime, I'm sending you to Austin with these two men of mine—tonight! I—"

McNELLY stopped as the corridor door burst open with a crash. Delaney whirled. Tad Hoskins was crouched there, eyes blazing wildly, a stub-barreled shotgun gripped in his hands.

"Don't move, none of you!" he cried. "Drop your gun, Cap—you and the others—or I'll blow you apart! Lift your hands. That's right!"

Delaney leaped back to side him, after scooping up one of the Ranger's fallen guns.

"Tad!" he yelled.

"And not my ghost either, Tex!" the boy quavered. "But for a time tonight I thought I was seeing yours. Let's go, pard, while the going's good. I thought these gents wouldn't believe you. But I do!"

McNelly and the others stood with lifted arms, not daring to chance the reckless kid's wrath. Their guns lay at their feet. Bottles looked as if he had been stabbed in the back.

"You're making a terrible mistake, son," McNelly rapped.

"It won't top yours, Cap!" Tad retorted furiously.

Swiftly Delaney gathered up the men's guns, keeping one in his hand leveled. He backed into the door, primed and deadly.

"The boy's right, McNelly," he said softly. "I'm leaving here tonight with one idea in mind—smashing the truth out of Lamont. And even Ranger law ain't going to stop me! We're leaving now, and if any of you give chase I'll shoot to kill!"

None of the men moved. They read the death promise in Delaney's eyes as he kept backing. In the dark corridor he suddenly whirled, shoved Tad outside and down the steps ahead of him. Dumping the extra guns to the ground, he raced for his horse, flung astride and spurred away. Tad followed, clinging to his shotgun, his face ashen in the darkness, but his eyes glowing with triumph.

"Take the lead, pard!" he whooped. "I'll cover the rear!"

Delaney grinned in spite of himself, thrilling to the boy's courage. Pursuit, he knew, would be swift. McNelly, chagrined at his failure, would hang and rattle with all the bulldog determination for which he was known.

XIV

HEADING straight eastward across the valley, Delaney held the killing pace for miles. Damp wind lashed at him and Tad Hoskins and lightning crackled like gunfire. Then huge drops of rain began falling until it was coming down in sheets.

The storm broke in all its fury by the time they reached the distant hills. In the blinding, drenching downpour, Delaney sought the scant shelter of an overhanging rock. Here he flung down, calling to Tad. The boy left his horse and raced to the rock canopy, a bedraggled little figure in his rain-plastered clothes.

Above the howl of the storm Delaney had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"We'd best do some planning now, Tad. First off, do you know anything about Lamont?"

"Nothing but what I already knowed, pard. He's a skunk, that's all. Him and Chaffee both."

Delaney discovered then that Tad had been doing some spying of his own for weeks. Unwilling to believe anything but that Delaney was innocent, he had spent his days watching the Circle L, listening, doing a job that his father might have done had old Bowie been more suited for a lawman's badge. But as a reward for his work Tad had learned nothing of any consequence.

"That buzzard Lamont left the Circle L a few days ago, pard, heading east. That means he's back in New Orleans. He comes and goes. Ain't seen hair nor hide of Chaffee for some time, either. Don't know where that sidewinder could of went."

Words poured from Tad. He missed telling no detail of all that had been going on during Delaney's absence. Bitterly he told of the crimes laid to Delaney—much the same story that Bottles had told Captain McNelly earlier in the evening, which of course, Tex had no way of knowing. Tad also said that Starr was leaving for St. Louis. She had confided in him to that extent.

And tonight, hearing that Chili was to be married to Maria Gomez at the Horseshoe ranch house, Tad had sneaked over to peer in the window. He had heard Delaney ride up. Not knowing who it was, Tad had hidden. Then when McNelly and Bottles had taken their prisoner into Mosquero, Tad had trailed them.

"Whoa up here, pard!" Tad said abruptly. "I didn't mean to do all the talking. Let me hear your side of the story."

Delaney gave him the highlights. And Tad sat with mouth open, staring at him.

"The dirty skunks!" he croaked. "They can't—"

"They've already done their dirt, if that's what you mean, Tad!" Delaney muttered. "Now it's up to me to find 'em."

"I'll go with you!"

"No, Tad. Not unless you want to go because you're afraid of McNelly catching up with you."

"Afraid of that? Shucks, pard! T'ain't that! I can play hide-and-seek with McNelly and his men for a month in this valley. I know every cave in these hills and I can cache enough grub to last."

"Then you stay here, Tad. You'll be doing me a bigger turn by watching things in the valley and telling me about it when I come back."

"But you *will* come back?" Tad asked fretfully.

"I'll be back," Delaney said grimly.

Their hands met in a firm grip. Tad was afraid to trust his voice to say more. Then, as the rain slacked some, Delaney strode to his horse and mounted. With a wave of his hand he rode away, guiding his horse through the brush-covered hills by the vivid flashes of lightning. He wanted as many miles between him and Mosquero by daybreak as possible.

So Delaney, with the stigma of traitor and murderer on his name, started back over the Texas trail, hiding by day and riding by nights. Rockport, then New Orleans, was his destination. Finding Lamont became an obsession with him that drove him on. For Lamont, he knew now, was the brains—the sinister power—behind all the trouble. Chaffee was merely Lamont's hired killer.

WORD of the ghastly deeds of which he was accused had spread fast. The state had placed a bounty on Delaney's head, patently intending to make an example of him to discourage lawlessness. Because of this, Tex Delaney was forced to avoid the scattered ranches where ordinarily he could have lodging and food.

Living off of early berries and what wild game he could shoot, he went on, losing track of the days and the distance he rode. Weariness bedeviled him, and Jean Lamont's image before his mind's eye was ever a source of annoyance. That she could be of the same flesh and blood of the man whose dastardly cunning had played such havoc seemed impossible. Yet he was forced to admit that such was the case.

Twice Delaney missed capture by a hair's breadth. The last time was when the trail made a sharp bend and he rode up to the campfire of three men before he knew it. The hang of their guns, their bearded, hard-lined faces marked them for outlaws. In that hazy dawn they leaped to their feet, as surprised as Delaney.

Whether or not they recognized him from the law's description he would never know, but in their hail of lead he roared away, bent low and shooting back to discourage pursuit. From then on he avoided the trail entirely, staying in the hills. There were days when the warm early spring sun shone down upon the greening hills and brush. But nights were still chill with the last breath of winter.

Then came the drizzling night when he began circling Copana Bay, and he smelled the salt air. Through swamps and flooded bayous, lush with reedy growth and vines and riotous with the clamoring of frogs, he made his way until from a hilltop he saw the glimmering lights of Rockport. On the outskirts of the town he played his luck to the limit by riding boldly into a teamster's camp.

He sold his horse and gear to a buckskin oldster who was obviously none too friendly with the law himself. Pocketing the money, Delaney went ahead on foot to Rockport.

Rockport! Gulf depot and melting pot for a state that beckons of riches and adventure; strident and seething with an industry that had sprung up overnight—the hide and tallow factories. Here, now, where ships had not docked in fifty years, was a bus-

tling metropolis, thriving on the export of hides, horns, barrels of tallow and hogsheads of beef.

Thousands of cattle — sea-lions — cramped in hurriedly improvised corrals, awaited slaughter, or shipment to New Orleans or Cuba. From Corpus Christi to Galveston it was the same, roaring to a trade that sickened dyed-in-the-wool cowmen, but which offered their only salvation. If beef prices should finally become normal, and trails opened to the north, this sordid industry would die. These packeries of clapboard and pine would decay in their own stench.

Adding to the confusion came the moan and bawl of cattle from the wharf pens, the blast of boat whistles, the raucous bawl of teamsters. All a man needed to open a cannery was a little ground, some barrels of salt, a slaughter shack, pens, vats, pulleys and butcher knives. But getting them was another matter. Money was scarce. Horses brought ready cash, but cattle were a drug on the market.

An ox-cart piled high with beef hides rolled along the muddy street toward the waterfront. Through the teeming human tide the bearded buckskin driver recognized an old friend he was passing.

"Which factory is offering the most, Jeff?" he bawled.

"Waugh!" roared back a cowman on the sidewalk. "It's nip and tuck, friend. Lamont is still bidding highest, with a dollar raise per plew—making eight. Who would have thought we'd come to this?"

"Not me, pardner. But anything till we can get on our feet. Word is out that the Northern markets are beginning to want beef."

The stamp and roar of the canneries working day and night shifted to care for the influx of new herds. Back of them, where ducks and geese foraged were acres of discarded carcasses, smelling to high heaven. Shacks and tents were on the outskirts; the fires and camps of teamsters and herders. Brushpoppers and buckskin men, Mexicans and cattlemen, gamblers, carpet-baggers and adventurers overran the town, gambling, drinking, trading and selling.

Vice was rampant, and men from all states, milling in the mud and stench and rain, were imbued with the spirit of rivalry and lust. Back on the hills the homes of the elite stood aloof, as if striving to lift themselves above the squalor and vice below.

The main street, deep with mud, was flanked with stores and saloons which were constantly packed, overflowing. And the waterfront was stacked high with cargo and hogsheads, seething with running roustabouts, and murky in the glow of huge lanterns.

A steamer nosed into the landing, her bell clanging orders to the men in the engine room. Two deckhands stood ready with the hawsers, and from the pilot-house window leaned the captain, bellowing orders and cursing. Slicker-clad sailors and firemen appeared on deck.

There was the clatter and slam of opening hatches; the churn and roar of paddle-wheels in the water. Passengers peered from the lighted windows of their cabins, awed and perhaps frightened by the turmoil and confusion below.

Delaney shouldered his way through the teeming throng to the waterfront, impelled by the urgency of his mission. His plans were laid. From a grizzled muleteer he'd got his directions to Lamont's factory which faced the waterfront. It was nothing more than a huge office in front, with the barnlike structures of the factory and pens in the rear.

The place was a beehive of activity. Buyers from other ports and booted cowmen swarmed in and out of the front door, doing business with several clerks inside. Back of the long counter were desks, huge iron safes and wooden files.

One clerk, plainly the manager of the office, stepped up to the counter opposite Delaney.

"What's your business, my friend?" he asked surlily.

He was a pasty-faced young man with thin hair and nervous eyes, offensive with his own importance. Delaney watched him closely for any sign he might give of recognition. There was none. Not then.

"I'm looking for Pierre Lamont," Delaney said quietly.

"Mr. Lamont," the clerk snapped unpleasantly, "is in New Orleans." He stopped abruptly, catching his breath, his face paling. "Who—who are you?" he managed to get out. He was staring intently now into Delaney's gaunt, bearded face.

"Bill Smith," Delaney said coolly. "Rancher from San Patricio. Why, friend?"

The clerk smiled, coughed uneasily, and apologized. He said he guessed he'd made a mistake.

"Took you for another man," he mumbled. "Is that all you wish to know?"

"That's all," Delaney clipped, and walked out.

Like a released arrow, Delaney sped toward the loaded wharves. Beyond question that clerk had recognized him from the description which had been passed along. Bitterly he cursed the circumstances that had prevented him learning more. But from even that brief encounter he had learned much. That was the clerk had sworn to the Mustang Valley men that Delaney was the man to whom he had paid the hide money!

Behind some piled cargo, Delaney went into hiding. Nor was he a minute too soon. A policeman barged into Lamont's office at a run. In just a moment he was back outside on the plank walk. He blew a whistle. Two other uniformed lawmen joined him, held an excited confab, then scattered to search. The word was out:

"Tex Delaney is still alive! Get him!"

Delaney whirled as one of the lawmen started toward the wharves. Then his blood froze. Like a huge wall boxes and barrels blocked him on both sides—and the lawman was coming straight toward him! Desperately he plunged through a narrow aisle between the boxes, coming head-on with the prow of a docked steamer.

With a start he glimpsed the ship's name painted on the hull. The *Lucy May!* Pursuit was dogging him and he had no choice. Remembering this was Stoker McGinnis' boat, he made a dash for the gang-plank. From the Texas deck came a muffled challenge, but Delaney went on, hurtling over the deck load and down the narrow catwalk alongside the engine room. Down the ladder to the stoke-hole he raced, ears pounding from the hiss and roar of escaping steam.

FIGURES confronted him as he whirled — brawny, hairy-chested men, naked to the waist and gleaming with sweat. Men with shovels in their hands, pausing before the open doors of the huge fire-boxes, startled by the intrusion. Then the largest of the group let out a bellow.

"Tex! Damn me, is it ye, or ain't it?"

Relief gusted through Delaney. "It's me, Stoker."

"And what might be the rush, me fine friend?"

"The law, Stoker! Quick—where can I hide?"

"The law!" he boomed. "By the blasted Blarney Stone, bucko, are the bluecoats still after ye? Well, let 'em come! I've told ye before and I'll tell ye ag'in—who's the law?"

"Quick, Stoker!"

"Back here with ye, my friend. And if the law comes a-snooping, me'n the other stokes will bat 'em over the heads with our shovels."

Boot heels pounded across the upper deck, clattered down the engine-room catwalk. Delaney dived through a black doorway into the coal-bin as the chief officer peered down into the stoke-hole.

"A fugitive is reported as coming aboard!" the man shouted. "Any of

you seen hide or hair of him?"

"And who might be wanting to sneak into such a black hole as this?" Stoker roared back belligerantly. "Fugitive, be damned! We got to raise some steam if we're shoving off!"

The officer vanished. Breathing easier, Delaney crept out of hiding at Stoker's bidding.

"Squat and rest easy, Tex, boy." Stoker grinned. "We'll be moving in a few minutes. Then ye'll be safe, and ye can tell me everything ye're a-mind to."

Delaney was content to hunker in a corner while the other men worked. The three stokers with McGinnis went about their chores half-heartedly, grumbling and cursing the name of Lamont. Overhead, feet clumped across the deck, the steamer's whistle blew three sharp blasts.

A bell began ringing. There came the muted creak of hawsers, the clank of lever bars from the engine room, the rumbling of the gangplank being hauled in.

XV

SHOUTED orders carried faintly from the pilot-house. Then the great paddle-wheel began churning, and Delaney felt the sway and rock as the steamer turned and caught the tide.

"More steam!" came the snarled order from the engine room.

One of the stokers beside McGinnis turned, eyes glinting in the red glow of the fire-box.

"Steam!" he raged. "I'll steam you! Damn this scow and the polecat that owns it! But you can tell the skipper this'll be the last!"

One of the stokers produced a bottle, a luxury taboo on board. It passed from hand to hand, but Stoker McGinnis shook his head.

"I'll pass it, boys," he said, grinning. "We'll need one sober head, if that plan we've got on the fire is to work. Touch light on it, me buckos!"

They killed the bottle, and tossed it aside. Delaney missed none of their talk and actions, and reached his own conclusions. Mutiny was afoot here—and little effort being made to conceal it. Plainly these men hated Lamont with a hatred as venomous as that which Delaney himself felt for the man. Stoker McGinnis just shoveled coal in grim silence, deep in thought.

Delaney felt the pulse and throb of the boat. When the steam was up the stokers laid aside their shovels for a brief respite. Stoker hurried across to Delaney.

"In here," he said significantly.

As he stepped back where the coal was piled high, Delaney sensed the big man's troubled spirit. In a husky whisper Stoker began firing questions. Tensely, but briefly, Delaney told practically the whole story of the tragic events which had occurred since the night he and Chili had met Stoker in New Orleans. It made the big Irishman's eyes pop.

"And this clerk back there at the factory, Tex," Stoker queried. "Why didn't ye shoot him? He'd been one of the whelps out of the way."

"That clerk is small fry, Stoker. He'll keep. Right now I'm taking a big gamble on reaching Lamont. Him and Chaffee are the only two men alive who can ever clear my name. As sure as you're born they're resonsible for the raids in Mustang Valley. They're back of my dad's murder, too—some way, somehow—if one of 'em didn't actually kill him."

Stoker's eyes glowed with aroused anger. "I heard about one of Lamont's wagon trains being raided, but that was all. It was all right with us, Tex—us boys who are working and slaving for a lot of nothing in this black hole to make Lamont rich. Any misfortune to the damned Frenchman is good news to us. And we don't mind having a hand in such."

"What do you mean, Stoker?"

"Ye ain't blind, me boy."

Then Stoker was gripping Delaney's

arm, the flood waters of his bitter passions breaking in a torrent of words.

"Mutiny, me fine bucko! That's what ye're going to witness. None of my making, no. But I'm falling in with it, heart and soul to help wreck the black devil that has torn out your heart and who is depriving us men of our just pay. Don't stare, Tex. Listen. In another hour we'll be through Arkansas Pass, heading across the Gulf for New Orleans. When we hit the Pass that's the signal to strike."

"Stoker, don't be a fool! That's no way to smash Lamont. Mutiny on the high seas means prison for all of you!"

"And who's afraid of prison, Tex?" Stoker retorted. "Certainly none of us. Listen—for two round trips now our pay has been kept from us. Food is rotten. The skipper shrugs and feeds us promises. We've got our craws full of it, Tex! These men ye see yonder are tough—the dregs of seven hells. And blood and gunfire ain't going to stop 'em. "When the time comes, Tex, we're taking the ship over. Sure, they'll kill the captain. I know that, but I got backwashed into the deal and there's no backing out now, me boy. Mutiny has spread like fire across the whole ship. They're primed and waiting. Once we get in control, we're heading straight for Galveston. There we'll sell the hides aboard and collect the money that's due us."

THEY saw the shadow of a man hovering near and turned. One of the stokers faced them, eyes glowing like hot coals in his smeared, sweaty face. He was a thick-chested giant with a six-shooter in one paw. Above the throb of the engine he rasped:

"We ain't waiting to clear the Pass, Stoker. That's the word that drifted down. Get your gun and come on. How does this jigger stand—with us or agin us?"

"With us, Blackie!" Stoker thundered. "Let's go!"

In one bound Stoker leaped to a corner where he had cached his gun. Scooping it up, he faced Delaney as the other men scrambled up the ladder. He was the wild fighting Irishman of old, driven by passions that make men smash and kill. All the arguments in the world could not stop him now. He wanted vengeance, and was taking the easy, quick way to get it.

"Come on, Tex! Let's wreck Lamont!"

Like a raging bull he went up the ladder as yells and the crack of pistol shots came from the deck above. And caught in the undertow of that savagery, Delaney followed, his own pistol palmed. Behind Stoker he hit the cargo deck to find firemen, engineers and deckhands swarming to the shelter of cargo boxes, their guns flaming red. From the pilot-house came the scream of a man in mortal agony.

"That's the chief officer," a crouched mutineer shrilled. "Now get the skipper!"

Suddenly the man's body jarred, his last words choking in his throat as lead crashed into his body from the bridge. Delaney dived out of the line of fire, flattening behind a stanchion as more lead ripped into the deck about him.

Stoker, bellowing and cursing, led a small group of mutineers toward the ladder that led to the passenger deck. Gunfire from the bridge dropped two of them. The line faltered and fell back.

Wild panic swept the ship from stem to stern. The paddle-wheels kept churning and the black, foggy night closed in as lights went dead. On the bridge, near the pilot-house, the captain's body suddenly split over the rail, fell with a crash to the lower deck. Then above that insane shouting, gunfire and confusion, rose a cry that fills seamen with horror.

"Fire! Fire! The hold's afire and there's powder on deck!"

Men charged past Delaney, tram-

pling their own companions in that mad rush to escape. Forgotten now was their lust to commandeer the boat and salvage the hides aboard. Getting into the water before the flames reached the powder drove them into a frenzy.

Those who could swim dived over the rail. Others sought frantically for life-preservers. Two life-boats were capsized in lowering them. The black shoreline was only half a mile away, so some would reach it safely. Others would sink in the inky waters of the Pass.

Delaney leaped to his feet. "Stoker!" he yelled.

Out of the hysteria and turmoil came the big Irishman's answering shout. Then he was at Delaney's side, yelling and pointing to the rail and clutching a life-preserver.

"Over the side, Tex! She'll blow any minute, boy!"

Smoke was already boiling out of the hatches. Lurid red flames sent an eerie glow from the engine-room door to which the fire had spread. Delaney raced to the rail, kicking out of his boots. Only then did he hear, above the bedlam, a woman's terror-filled scream from the passenger deck!

Delaney spun, as if struck with killer lead. Through the rolling thick smoke he glimpsed her, stumbling toward the ladder where flames were already leaping through the planking.

"Tex!" Stoker roared. "Ye'll never make it, boy! Come back, ye blundering bonehead! Come back!"

But Delaney did not turn back. Across the deck he sprinted, the heat burning through his socks. Up the combing he clawed his way, smoke choking him. Heat and flames licked at him, stung his hands and face and all but blinded him. On the passenger deck he scrambled to his feet—and collided with a girl's stumbling figure.

GRASPING her in his arms, he took the long way down the steps, the cabin shielding him from the terrific heat. There Stoker was waiting for him, the fiendish glow showing in his face.

He had ripped loose two more life-preservers.

"Into 'em, Tex. Hurry!"

Then for the first time Tex Delaney caught sight of the girl's white, terrified face. Their eyes met as she worked frantically to help him strap the belt about her waist. The shock was mutual.

Her lips moved. In that fleeting second she might have been seeing before her the answer to all her prayers.

"Señor Texas!" she sobbed.

Delaney carried her to the rail, all but overwhelmed with emotions that had stricken him dumb. Over the side they went together, arm in arm, striking the black water with a jolt that tore the breath from their lungs. For a second they were under. Then the three of them bobbed to the surface and fought free of the churning paddles.

The burning, doomed craft drifted on, leaving roiling water in her wake. In the glare Delaney spotted the black shoreline and struck out toward it, keeping Jean Lamont in tow. Stoker was swimming with powerful strokes, lending a hand.

"I can swim, Tex," Jean gasped. "Even if I couldn't this belt would keep me afloat."

"Then foller us!" Delaney snapped.

For what seemed hours they struggled against the tide, gasping and choking as waves slapped them. Just as Delaney found footing near the brushy shoreline they heard the booming explosion of the burning ship. In knee-deep water they turned, watched the torched hull go down.

Jean Lamont's face was drawn and ghostly pale.

"I hope," she said huskily, "I can find the men responsible for that crime some day. I'd like to see them hang."

"Me fine lady," Stoker said, without turning his head, "yer lookin' at one of thim now."

Jean stared, white and shaken, her

vocal chords too paralyzed for the moment for her to speak. Fear and dread widened her eyes. In the drizzle and chill darkness her ravaged face revealed her emotions. One hand fluttered to her throat as if her inner struggle were choking the life out of her.

"Texas!" she gasped.

"Just Tex, Jean!" he said coolly. "Tex Delaney. Remember?"

She came nearer him, her eyes probing into his very soul. Her dark hair hung wet and loose about her shoulders. Her long dress was plastered to her lithe body.

"*You* didn't have a hand in that mutiny, did you, Tex? I don't understand. It's all so confusing."

"Maybe I had no hand in starting the mutiny, Jean. But I made no move to stop it."

"But why—why?" she wailed.

Delaney laughed bitterly. Quickly he sobered.

"Why?" he repeated coldly. "You ask why, when every honest man in the state curses the name of your father and his hired gunmen who have robbed and killed to satisfy their own greed?"

She fell back as if slapped in the face, a half-moan, half-sob escaping her.

"Tex, you don't know what you're saying! You're mad, completely mad!" she almost shrieked.

"I'll say we're mad!" Stoker blurted. "Plenty!"

"Let's go!" Delaney snapped.

"Tex—wait!" Jean, ashore now, ran to him, her teeth chattering, not only from the cold but from the black lash of her emotions. "Tell me what's wrong. Something is—terribly wrong. And I've got to know right now! What were you doing on that boat? You were not in Dad's employ!"

"I was heading for New Orleans, Jean—with just one thing in mind. That was to kill your father, Pierre Lamont!"

She saw the determination in his eyes, but stared back unflinchingly.

SHE had a grip on herself now. "At least you're truthful," she said scornfully.

"The truth being something you're probably not used to!" he rasped.

"We're getting nowhere, Tex."

"That's why I say we'd best start back for town."

"No—wait!" she said coolly. "What's happened to you that makes you hate Dad so, Tex? I want to know."

"Are you still engaged to marry Jacques Chaffee, Jean?"

"Yes," she admitted miserably.

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Only his picture. Oh, you don't understand, Tex! I've grown up as an American, but Dad is French and still clings to the customs of his people. About a year ago he promised my hand to Jacques Chaffee. We were to have been married months ago, but I kept putting off the wedding. I didn't want even to know the man. When business brought him to New Orleans I ran away and visited a girl friend. Dad was furious."

"And word never got to you about me being supposed to rob one of the wagon trains of hides?"

She was frankly puzzled. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Then I'll tell you this much, Jean. That night after I left you in the church in New Orleans I hurried back to Texas—to Mustang Valley—with my *compadre*, Chili Cortina. I got there to find my own dad dead—murdered. And, at your father's orders, Jacques Chaffee and his gunhands were skinning every cow they could lay a hand to. Then your father proposed a pool drive of the hires to Rockport, where he'd pay ten dollars a hide. Like a fool I listened to him, swallowed his rotten scheme, and was responsible for the other ranchers joining in with the idea.

"For that drive to get through safely meant salvation or ruin for the pool ranchers, Jean. With the law on my trail, in another matter, I joined the wagon train after it had started. Chaffee was wagon boss. He murdered

some of the valley boys who had come along instead of the older men, and turned his guns on me. In the fight I went down and he left me for dead. But with his snaky scheming he made it look as if *I* had killed the boys, then stolen the hides and collected the money for 'em. And Chaffee wouldn't have done it, Jean, without your father being a party to it!"

"Only one thing, Tex," she said, startled.

"And that?"

"Dad has never been in Mustang Valley!"

Delaney stiffened.

"Oh, Tex!" Jean cried quickly. "Don't you see? You've got to believe me!" She was suddenly clutching his arm beseechingly.

"You sure of that, Jean?" It was incredible.

"Dad has never been in Mustang Valley," she repeated. "*M'sieu* Chaffee made that investment of the ranch for him. Dad turned over the ranch, as well as many other of his business affairs to him. For months Dad has been ill, confined to his bed much of the time. I've known something was wrong, but he would never confide in me about his business. He's trusted men to handle his affairs. I don't understand it, Tex, but whatever has happened to make you hate Dad is—is not his fault!"

"Where is your father now, Jean?" Delaney clipped, his mind spinning. "And what were you doing on that boat?"

Jean tried to tell him, but her voice was so choked because of all her worry and fears that she could scarcely speak coherently. But Tex made out that Pierre Lamont, hearing rumors that all was not well with his holdings, had got up from a sick bed to investigate his New Orleans office. Ugly hints that the men on his boats were being mistreated and robbed of their pay reached him. Then came the shocking revelation that his business was not financially sound.

"Dad is bankrupt, Tex." Jean grew calmer as she hurried on. "It almost killed him when he learned that some of the men he trusted had robbed him. Then word came from *M'sieu* Chaffee for Dad to come to Mustang Valley immediately. Dad, his lawyer, and a bodyguard took the first boat out. He wouldn't listen to me going, but I sneaked aboard. They didn't discover me until we docked in Rockport two nights ago. Dad was afraid something might happen to me, so he put me in charge of the captain, with orders for me to be returned to New Orleans. I was locked in one of the cabins."

"My God!" groaned Tex.

That girl! Locked in a cabin on a burning boat.

XVI

JEAN had regained her composure when she told Tex and Stoker how, when they had reached the Pass and the shooting started, she had smashed the cabin door. The two men were thunder-struck.

Every word she had spoken pounded through Delaney's brain. There was much he didn't understand, but what he was astonishingly realizing was that Pierre Lamont—the real Lamont—was innocent of having had any part in the grisly tragedies that had wrecked his life.

"Where's your father now, Jean?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Dad and the two men with him were going to hire a coach and drive through to Mustang Valley, as *M'sieu* Chaffee instructed."

Delaney whirled on the bewildered Stoker.

"It's the trail back for me, Stoker!"

"And me, Tex, boy!" Stoker boomed. "And Hivin help thim who try to stop us! Damn me Irish soul if I've wronged an innercent man I'll do everything in me power to right it!"

Jean's low moan wrenched Delaney's heart. He saw her swaying. Just as she fell he grabbed her up in

his arms. The grueling ordeal had been too much for her.

"A brave gurrl, Tex," Stoker said admiringly.

"I knew that the first time I saw her, Stoker. And right now she was freezin' to death while she was talking to us—telling us the truth! Come on. We've got to get help for her, pronto!"

With Jean in his arms, Delaney forged through the tangle of trees and brush edging the shore. Thorns and sharp rocks cut at his wet sock feet as he struck out inland. Miles around the Gulf the distant lights of Rockport glimmered like tiny fireflies in the drizzling darkness.

Delaney's heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. Stoker offered to help him with Jean, but he shook his head. After a time they came out on a muddy, lonely road and turned toward town. When the lighted window of a roadside shack came into view Delaney broke into a loping run.

A yapping mongrel met them at the front gate. Stoker dashed ahead, beating his fist against the plank door. When it opened a grizzled dirt farmer faced them with a shotgun in the crook of his arm. He was wearing a long nightshirt and boots.

"What's all the hullabulloo about I'd like to know?" he bawled suspiciously. "What do you-all want?"

Delaney rapped back at him that they'd been aboard a boat that had sunk in the Pass. The three of them were among the few who had managed to reach shore safely. The girl he was carrying needed attention at once.

"Well, darnation! Why didn't you say so sooner, stranger? Hey—Ma! Maybe you'd best come lend a hand. Shipwrecked folks and a girl's been hurt.—Come in—come in."

Delaney carried Jean into a warm, lamplit room, placed her limp body on a sofa. Almost instantly a motherly, gray-haired woman with a wrapper over her night clothes appeared, to offer help. As Delaney rubbed Jean's wrists the farmer fetched a bottle of whiskey. Delaney touched the bottle to Jean's lips. She coughed and choked.

Her eyes fluttered open. She started, then smiled wanly.

"I'm all right, Tex," she whispered. "That's twice you've seen me faint. You'll begin thinking I—I'm—"

"What difference does it make, Jean, what I think?"

"A great deal, Tex," she said queerly. "It has, even since that night in the church in New Orleans."

"Poor girl!" the farm woman murmured. "You come along with me into the bedroom and get into some dry duds."

When the two women went into the next room, Delaney and Stoker warmed themselves in front of the fireplace, listening to the farmer's running fire of talk as they tried to dry out a little. He raised truck and chickens for a living, he said. Fearing the drenching downpour might have drowned some of his chickens he had just got up to see about them when he'd heard the knock on the door.

"What ship was you two fellers and the gal on when she went down?" he jabbered.

"The *Lucy May*," Delaney told him.

"Well, I'll swear!"

DELANEY asked if they could stay there for the night. They'd be only too welcome, the farmer told him. His wife tiptoed into the room to say that Jean already was in bed and falling asleep.

"Just plumb tuckered out, she is," the woman said.

Delaney and Stoker slept on blankets spread in front of the fireplace. But even in sleep Delaney found no surcease from his puzzling thoughts. They nagged at him in his uneasy dreams.

When dawn broke, gloomy and chill with fog and rain, he and Stoker were up. Quietly they sneaked outside. Quickly Delaney told the Irishman about a plan he had made.

"Just be careful, Tex," the big Irishman warned. "Don't get caught now. We're sticking together from here on. If there's trouble in Mustang Valley, that's where I want to be."

Pooling their money, Delaney took it and struck out alone for Rockport. He was gone the better part of the day. When he returned he was riding one horse and leading two others. He had food, and what few supplies they would need—boots for himself and Stoker, and boy's overalls and other range garb for Jean. Also a big hat to cover her dark braids which, coiled around her head, framed her face.

Deep-seated worry and tragic hopelessness were in Jean's eyes, despite her smile. All her life she had been carefully guarded from such things as the raw brutality of the frontier, but now that it had been forced upon her she accepted it bravely.

Looking at her, Delaney's pulses quickened. A warm glow touched him, but the grimness in him did not subside.

Carrying the clothes he had brought her, she darted into the bedroom. In just a few moments she returned, flushing as all eyes were turned on her lithe, boyish figure admiringly. She looked even smaller in overalls, jacket and rough boots, but the tilt of her head, and each movement of her body breathed of strength.

"I'm ready, Tex," she announced.

"It'll be a hard trip, Jean," he warned her. "Still want to go?"

"Yes, Tex," was all she said.

They left the farm again as night shadows began creeping over the bay country, thanking the farmer and his wife for all they had done. Delaney set the pace, circling Rockport, and striking the Texas trail miles inland.

The drizzle stopped and the heavens cleared. By midnight stars glimmered overhead, and ground fogs began lifting. With the clamor of frogs and crickets ringing in their ears, they went on mile after mile. Not once did Delaney call a halt, nor did he speak a word. But he was prepared for anything that might face them. In escaping from the doomed ship he had managed to save his six-shooter. In Rockport he had bought new cartridges, which were stuffed into the belt about his waist.

Jean had ridden saddle horses in the bridle parks in New Orleans. As did all ladies of breeding, she had ridden side-saddle. It would have been unthinkable to have done otherwise. In long flowing riding skirts she had taken brisk canters, sided by an instructor hired by her father.

Those days seemed vague, remote. She rode astride now as if she had always ridden like that. And she kept telling herself that the past few days were a nightmare from which she would soon awaken.

She clung to the kak horn some of the time. Every muscle in her body ached. Bits of what Delaney had told her kept spinning through her mind. At times she closed her eyes and saw the image of her mother, prim and lovely, as she had been before death had claimed her. She thought of Father Poiret, who had so often visited in the Lamont home, kindly, jovial and understanding.

And she was remembering that night in the church, after Delaney had left her. She had remained until Father Poiret returned. She readily confessed to him her strange feeling toward the bearded young Texan with the bitter eyes. She admitted having kissed him, even though she was betrothed to another man. She had called him Señor Texas.

And Father Poiret had smiled understandingly. He had never thought of Jean falling in love with anyone until then. It pleased him, for there had been something about the tall Texan's level way of speaking that had appealed to him.

"Love sometimes comes quickly, Jean," he had told her.

"Love?"

"You love him, my child," he'd replied simply.

Still she was uncertain.

SHE didn't know, even now. All she knew was that she had never forgotten the way he looked at her, the feel of his protective strength, and the warmth of his lips. She had never told her father exactly what had happened that night, for he would not have understood. Then, too, she thought that she would forget Señor Texas as time went on. But she never had. And in that great lonely house that was her home in New Orleans, while her father lay sick, Jean had prayed that some time she would again see her Señor Texas.

Near dawn, Delaney called a halt. Back in a gully he started a fire and cooked a quick meal. So still and tired she could hardly move, Jean denied herself rest, doing all she could to help. Afterward, when she rolled up in her blanket and slept, Delaney and Stoker talked for hours.

That afternoon they went on. In Delaney was a fierce urge to come to grips with the enemies who had devastated his life. In Mustang Valley lay the answers to all his puzzling questions. And in spite of the bitterness and unrest of his soul came hope that he could clear his name and deal out vengeance. Then, and only then, could he hope for the peace and security that he longed for.

Since that night months ago, when Frank Delaney had been killed, young Delaney had carried with him the brass cartridge that had brought death to his father. It had been a constant reminder of his vow to find the murderer.

There was another day of riding, with a bare pause to eat and drink. Then another, with Delaney constantly on the alert.

The third night he and Jean were preparing a scant meal while Stoker was scouting for more wood. They stooped for the frying pan together and almost collided. When they straightened, their eyes met and held. And in the warmth of her gaze Delaney read all the unvoiced promise of loyalty and love that a woman has to bestow upon a man.

He knew then, as never before, that he wanted Jean Lamont for his own —to protect and cherish all through life. He saw in her all the courage and wholesome goodness that is a woman's heritage. Yet he stiffened, looking away. For between them fell the shadow of her father, of Jacques Chaffee, and the fact that the law wanted Tex Delaney. Until that shadow was removed it was foolish for either of them to hope.

There were tears in Jean's eyes when Delaney turned to other chores without a word. Then Stoker came striding into camp.

They ate little and spoke less. Afterward they rolled up in their blankets. And even though Jean was dead-tired, she lay awake a long time, staring up through the trees at the stars, praying.

Before dawn Delaney was up, cooking breakfast. They rode out in the dawn, and he set a terrific pace that day, taking a short-cut over the hills where wild game was in abundance. Night had fallen when they reached the hilltop that overlooked Mustang Valley. It lay before them, an endless lake of shadows and gloom, strangely hushed, as if gripped in some evil spell.

"The Circle L first?" Stoker asked significantly.

"Yes," Delaney said softly.

He led the way down the slope, caution tempering his impatience. Jean's face was drawn and white, her eyes dark pools as she rode behind them. Lights of the Circle L ranch house came into view. Delaney slowed the pace, guiding his horse through the high brush carefully. Near one of the outlying corrals he stopped and slid to the ground.

"You stay here, Jean," he said guardedly.

She dismounted and came toward him.

"No, Tex. I'm going with you and Stoker. Whatever happens I want to be with you."

Delaney knew that nothing he could say would make this strong-willed girl change her mind. Stoker grinned broadly.

"Lead on, Tex. I ain't got a gun, but I can damn sure use me fists."

SIX-SHOOTER in hand, Delaney moved warily around the corral, sticking to the shadows. Behind him came Stoker and Jean. The front windows of the house glowed with light. There came the faint murmur of men's talk. The long, low-roofed bunkhouse was dark, but as they dodged into the shadows of the ranchhouse, Delaney saw several saddled horses in the front yard.

One man's voice suddenly lifted above the others, a voice with a hint of an accent and trembling with fury.

"*Mon Dieu!* What a fool I was to trust you, Chaffee!"

Jean was clutching Delaney's arm, whispering:

"That's Dad!"

"That's what I figured," Delaney said and gritted, "Stoker, come on!"

At that moment the front door of the house burst open and men came charging out onto the gallery.

XVII

ON THE night the *Lucy May* docked in Rockport, three unobtrusive men disembarked along with other passengers. In the busy turmoil along the waterfront those three men picked their way to the center of town without stopping. All of them carried carpet-bags, and one of the men had a small legal-looking valise tucked under his arm.

At a livery stable a stage-coach was rented, a team and driver hired. The man with the small valise busied himself in stores along the main thoroughfare for an hour or more, buying supplies and attending to the details attendant on an arduous trip.

Lanterns were attached to the coach, front and rear. Around midnight a bundled, profane driver trundled the coach out on the Texas trail. The three men were inside, their luggage on the rack above them.

"It will probably be a strenuous five-day trip, Mr. Lamont," the man with the valise said. "Do you suppose you can stand it?"

The tall, thin-faced man called Lamont leaned back against the cushioned seat. His flat-crowned hat, polished boots and tailored broadcloth indicated that he was a man of breeding and wealth. Beneath shaggy gray brows were penetrating dark eyes, hooded with shadows. The pallor of his cheeks told of a lingering illness. But pride and determination showed in every line of this aging Frenchman's countenance. Here was a man who was rabid in his loves and hates.

"I am all right, *M'sieu Holt,*" he said wearily.

Casper Holt, his secretary, was a man who boasted of his knowledge of law—a little rabbit of a man whose pince-nez made his eyes look twice their size. His bony features were the color of dough as he kept fingering the valise across his lap. It was obvious that he was ill-at-ease—which was natural, since for all of his fifty-seven years he had looked to others for protection, abhorring violence, and it looked as if he was facing it now.

Across from him sat the third man, a derby hat cocked on one side of his round head. His black coat was pulled back, revealing a shiny badge. He was a florid-faced man with marblelike eyes and a frayed, unlit cigar in his mouth. As the stage rolled on through the drizzling night he occasionally leaned forward to spit out of the window.

"Ain't nothing either of you got anything to worry about with me along," he said confidently, time after time, as if he felt reassurance needed.

"Hope not, Fallon," said Casper Holt.

"You've seen me in action, ain't you, Holt?"

"Sure I have."

"Then quit worrying."

"I'm just worrying about Mr. Lamont," murmured the secretary. "I've got him to think about, you know."

"He's all right. He's asleep."

They went like that the night through, although for most of the time in silence. Along the brush-hemmed, rutted trail they halted for breakfast at dawn, then went on. Noon came and passed, but they made no stop again until evening. Again they ate, rested a few hours, and once more resumed their journey.

On and on they went, day after day, deeper into the tumbled, lawless land, forging swollen streams and bouncing over slippery trails where their lurching stage swayed close to the edge of cliffs. The driver cursed the jaded horses. They saw no sign of human life; only deer, wild mustang and maverick cattle that went crashing off through the brush at their approach.

The hardships and continual jolting put lines of fatigue in the men's faces. Fear became accentuated in Casper Holt's eyes. His face and hands appeared to grow thinner.

"How much farther is it, Mr. Lamont?" he asked time and again.

"It can't be far now," the Frenchman would assure him.

"Big state, this here Texas," said Fallon.

That night they topped a hump in the trail and the black, broad expanse of Mustang Valley lay beneath them. In the far distance they spotted the lights of Mosquero. The driver lashed his team on. The brush rose high on both sides of the trail.

AS THEY made an abrupt turn around the toe of a hill the driver swore, dropped the lines and clawed frantically for his rifle as riders suddenly blocked the trail. A gun in the hands of one of them spurted flame.

Rifle half-raised, the driver stiffened, a bullet through his heart. He fell from his perch, striking the near wheel, then falling soddenly to the ground. In a flash the riders were dismounted, yanking open the stagecoach doors.

Casper Holt screamed as rough hands jerked him outside. A gun prodded into his side.

"Shut up, runt!" a snarling voice said. "Come on, you two other jiggers! Pile out with hands high!"

Holt was pushed out first, both arms in the air, his face ashen. After him came Fallon and Lamont, eyes feverish with indignation and outrage.

"If this is a holdup—"

"This ain't no holdup, mister. The boss wants to see you, and took this way of doing it."

"Who is this boss to whom you refer?"

"Pierre Lamont."

"Why, *I'm* Pierre Lamont!" the tall, sallow-faced man cried, aghast.

Chaffee grinned wolfishly. "That's what *you* think, mister."

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Jacques Chaffee."

"Par tous les diables!" Lamont raged. "You are crazy, man! This is an outrage! I demand that you let us go on! *Mon Dieu!"*

"Cut out the parley-vous talk!" Chaffee rapped. *"Bueno,* boys, tie 'em up, take any guns they have and load 'em back in the coach. Silver, tie your horse on behind and drive. Toss the dead driver in the back with 'em."

Lamont stood the torture of being tied better than did his two terror-stricken companions. White-faced and shaken, he was shoved into the coach. Moaning, Casper Holt fell to the floor beside the body of the dead driver. Fallon, his derby hat awry, stripped of his pistol, slumped on the seat, terrified beyond words.

Silver climbed up to the coach seat. He left the road, heading across the brush-dotted valley at a tangent. A half-dozen hard-faced, double-gunned Circle L men rode ahead and behind the coach.

One of the riders eyeing Chaffee narrowly, asked, "Who is that tall, sick-looking jigger, Chaffee?"

"Loco. Thinks he's Pierre Lamont."

When they drew up in the Circle L ranch yard, Chaffee unloaded the prisoners and ordered Silver to drive the coach on into the barn.

Hands tied behind their backs, the three men escorted into the house. Chaffee ordered the riders to wait in the front room. Quickly he prodded the prisoners down a long, gloomy corridor. A door stood ajar, allowing a shaft of lamplight to spear out into the hallway.

Lamont was first to enter this back room. He scanned the heavy, hand-carved table and chairs and the ornate furniture. Across the room a big man stood in front of a fireplace. As Lamont's eyes came to rest on the man, he stopped. Fear was no part of him. Only loathing and rage burned in his eyes and deepened the lines of suffering in his pallid face.

"*M'sieu Chaffee!*" he exclaimed huskily. "What in God's name is the meaning of this? Speak up, man!"

The big man across the room was smiling, but his dark eyes were bright with the passions and lust of a killer. About him was all the supreme confidence of a gambler who scorns anything but big stakes. His black mustache was carefully trimmed and his clothes were immaculate.

All pretense of decency had dropped from the man. His grinning face was a mask of evil—the face of a man driven by mad greed, gloating in power, and deadly as a coiled rattler.

"In this Brasada country, my friend," he said softly, "*I* am known as Pierre Lamont. That is the way it will continue. I'm glad you got my message to come here. We were expecting you. That's why I had the men meet you. This goggle-eyed little man I take to be your secretary? And I presume this fat-faced one in the derby is a law-man of sorts?"

"Chaffee!" Lamont cried hoarsely. "You impostor! You—"

"Where is your charming daughter?"

"In New Orleans, thank God!"

"She'll be shocked when she learns that your coach was raided by renegades, and that you were killed. I regret that you won't be present at her wedding."

TREMBLING as the shocking truth became clear, Lamont lunged forward, blind to his own helplessness. The big man's fist drove him back against the wall, where he stood with blood trickling down from the corners of his lips, staring with the dazed look of a man who has met a nightmare in the flesh.

"You know what you're to do, Chaffee?" the big man rasped to the gunman who was known in Mustang Valley as Jacques Chaffee.

"Sure."

"Did the men wonder about the deal tonight?"

"I told 'em this gent was loco."

"Good! Then do as I told you. I'll leave Silver behind to help you. After tonight there will be no more raids. This one will be the last."

He was striding past the three prisoners toward the hall door when Pierre Lamont's voice rose with tremulous fury.

"*Mon Dieu!* What a fool I was to trust you, Chaffee!"

The big man was already out in the hall, tugging a big hat low over his eyes and pulling on a slicker. The waiting Circle L gunhands in the front room tramped after him, out the front door. In the yard they flung astride their mounts, jabbed spurs, and roared away.

Leaving the barn, Silver hurried into the house through the kitchen door. When he entered the back room where the prisoners were awaiting their doom, the gunman masquerading as Jacques Chaffee said:

"Take 'em to the barn, Silver."

"That's murder, Chaffee," the stringy gunman protested.

"That's what you're paid for."

"Sure—sure."

"And Lamont is good to you, ain't he?"

"Sure."

Silver's restless eyes looked at the three terrified men, and he licked his dry lips. Once, a long time ago, he had tried to go straight, but his greed for fine horses had held him to an evil path. He had assumed the perpetual sneer that he thought all gunmen were supposed to have, but as armor in his slow-working mind against memories of smoking guns and faces contorted with fear and death. He might not have been bad if the breaks for him had been different.

"Come on," he ordered the prisoners.

The three men walked out of the room and Silver followed them, a big six-shooter gripped in his bony fist. He guided them out to the kitchen where he paused to light a lantern. Then he ordered them to go outside across the yard and to the barn. They uttered no protest, walking as if dazed.

Inside the barn, near the stagecoach, Silver stopped them. Only then did Casper Holt find his voice. He knew he was going to die, and the horror of it filled his bulging eyes.

"Don't!" he screamed pitifully.

He slumped to the floor in a dead faint. Fallon stood trembling, his round head bare and his eyes wild. Lamont stood rigid and scornful, face working, as if struggling vainly against the inevitable. He crossed himself as Silver's gun began leveling.

"Drop that gun, Silver!" a low voice said from the doorway behind Silver. "I don't want to kill you. We're going to need you to testify!"

Silver jerked around, the six-shooter dropping from his fingers to the floor. He saw two men in the doorway, limned against the black night outside.

"Delaney!" he said, stupefied.

"Cut 'em loose, Stoker!" Delaney gritted. "Then come on to the house. We've got to hurry!"

Delaney whirled, raced back toward the house, his brain afire with what he had overheard. With jarring clarity all the sordid mystery that surrounded his life had come clear. Killing rage, unlike anything he had ever known stormed through him. Yet he was cool when he reached the front door.

HE STEPPED inside, gun palmed and tense. The door to the ranch house office stood open before him. And from that room came the snarled query of the gunman masquerading as Chaffee:

"That you, Silver? What's the matter? I didn't hear no gunshots."

Then Delaney was in the room, striding slowly forward. To him only one thing existed in the room—Chaffee who stood facing him, drink in hand. The Circle L foreman's glass shattered as it dropped to the floor. Black panic swirled in his face. His dead and colorless eyes jerked wide.

"Delaney!" he cried throatily. "You're dead!"

Delaney's lips didn't move. "Back from the grave to square things, Chaffee!"

Stumbling backward, Chaffee stabbed frenziedly for his gun, fired but missed as Delaney's gun flamed. The bullet caught the Circle L foreman in the right arm, ripping the gun from his grasp. Then with all his savagery unleashed, Delaney went after him, smashing him to the floor under the very weight of his drive. His fingers found Chaffee's thick throat, stifling the man's curses and screams.

Giving full vent to his fury, Delaney jerked Chaffee back to his feet and battered him down again. The strength and fight went out of Chaffee. His breath came in great gulps. Then steely fingers found his windpipe and his contorted face darkened.

Neither man was conscious of the other people in the room behind them. Jean was there in her father's arms; Fallon and Casper Holt, with only their eyes alive in their dead-white faces. And Stoker, gripping a six-shooter and yelling:

"Choke him, Tex, boy! Choke the damned truth out of him!"

Only then did Delaney become aware of their presence. Through a

red haze he saw Chaffee's ugly face. His grip relaxed, but Chaffee lay limp, gasping for breath, his courage gone. Nothing is so horrible as the pleas of a man who knows he is done and is afraid.

"Don't kill me, Delaney! Don't kill me!"

"Talk fast then, Chaffee! It's your only chance!"

"Wait! Give me a chance to get my breath."

"Your name's not Chaffee, is it?"

"No, Delaney. My real name's Durk Bullard."

"And the real Chaffee?"

"Is the one that framed all this, Delaney. Don't kill me for what he done. It was his idee for me to take his name and him take the name of Lamont. I was afraid all along he'd never get by with it, even if he is smart." The man whose name was Durk Bullard was babbling, his eyes rolling whitely.

"Where did he and the men go?" demanded Delaney.

"To the Hoskins ranch."

XVIII

KICKING the weapon that had belonged to Bullard, alias Chaffee, toward the stunned group of onlookers, Delaney leaped to his feet, scooping up his own gun.

"Guard him, Lamont!" he panted. "And wait here!"

"Tex!" Jean screamed.

She and Stoker raced after Delaney as he sprinted down the hall through the front room, then outside. He had almost reached the corral where they had left their horses before he realized they were following him.

"Jean!" he snapped huskily. "Go back!"

"No, Tex! Remember what I told you? I'm going along!"

There was no turning her back. Nor was there time for words. As they flung astride their horses they heard the crackle of distant gunfire that wrenched a groan from Delaney. He sent his horse bolting off into the brush, with Jean and Stoker riding at his heels. Jean, riding with all the courage and grace of a girl who is born to the saddle, had cast her lot with the fighting Texan she loved. And Stoker, clutching the kak horn, bouncing and swaying, cursing and yelling, was thrilling to the lust of battle.

But Delaney never looked back. In that mad ride thorny brush tore at his legs. The roar of the wind and thunder of hoofbeats filled his ears. His eyes kept stabbing the starlit gloom ahead. Over a ridge he swooped, riding the stirrups. Then he heard again the echo of gunfire, glimpsed the dim outline of Bowie's ranch house and outbuildings.

Rifle flame spurted from the windows, from the barn. And Chaffee's killers, caught in that holocaust of lead, were fleeing. It didn't make sense to Delaney. Somewhere along the line the real Chaffee's murderous plans had gone wrong. Caught in the treacherous web of his own spinning, his men were being slaughtered. Only a few would escape in that withering fire.

"Stoker, you and Jean stay back!" Delaney yelled.

Shadows leaped out of the night in front of them. Two Circle L gunmen, bent low and spurring out of gun range, suddenly burst upon them. Panic spoiled their aim, for they fired first and missed. Delaney triggered. His gun bucked and one of the riders fell from his running horse. Then, even as Stoker yelled, Delaney recognized the other man.

It was the real Jacques Chaffee, the man who had posed as Pierre Lamont, whose audacity and cunning had plunged Mustang Valley into ruin!

Grimly driven by one last desire to finish the chore to which he had dedicated his life, Delaney whirled to give chase.

Just when Chaffee's well-planned scheme had seemed certain of success, it had come crashing to earth about him. From that death-trap at Hoskins's ranch he struck out for the Bor-

der. But Nemesis was right back of him!

Occasionally on that wild ride, Delaney lost sight of Chaffee. But each time he picked up the fleeing man's trail as they thundered up hill and down, through dense thickets and around bog holes. More than once, as the distance between them lessened, Delaney could have shot Chaffee. But he held his hand. A quick death by a bullet was too good for that black devil.

"Chaffee!" Delaney yelled at the top of his lungs, as he drew near.

The big range hog flung one look backward. His hat was gone, and his eyes glistened in the starlight which suddenly gleamed from the barrel of his gun. Frantically he triggered, only to hear a click on empty shells. Cursing, he hurled the weapon away. His horse was tiring, faltering. Then, where the brush broke into a clearing, the animal went down, catapulting the big Frenchman to the ground.

Delaney leaped from saddle, tossing his own six-shooter aside. Chaffee rose to meet him like a great wounded grizzly, his clothes torn, his face scratched and bleeding from thorns. But there was no part of a coward in Chaffee. He bulked large, lips pulled back in a wolfish snarl, eyes glowing with unutterable hate, still challenging.

"They told me you were dead, Delaney!" he grated. "And like a fool I fell for it. Things would have been different if I hadn't had to trust to stupid fools!"

"Your game is finished, Chaffee," Delaney said coolly.

THEY were alone. Neither man was armed. As they faced one another they knew that death waited for one of them. With a rush they came together, both powerful as raging bulls, both impelled by the same lust to smash and kill. There was no science now; no duck and feint and spar.

Delaney's rock-hard fists worked like pistons. He barely felt the crushing drive of Chaffee's right and lefts. In close grips they went down, rolled and kicked and gouged. Delaney was up first, chest heaving, sledging Chaffee back on his heels. His lungs felt as if they were bursting. He tasted the salty warm blood in his mouth.

Chaffee, bloody and beaten, went down again. Before he could stagger up Delaney was on him, his fingers locked in a vise-like grip on the man's throat. He didn't feel Chaffee's weakening blows in his face. Through a hazy blur he saw the killer's hate-filled eyes flutter as death closed in, and with the same cold mercilessness he would have shown in stamping out the like of a snake, Delaney hung on.

Minutes later, Delaney rose to his feet, ripping Chaffee's cartridge belt from about the big man. With slow-working, fumbling fingers he punched out one of the few remaining cartridges from its loop. It was a .45 bullet—a duplicate to the one which had killed Frank Delaney.

"The job's done, Dad," Delaney murmured.

He went back to his horse, mounted, and started back. He didn't hurry. A heavy load seemed lifted from his shoulders. But for himself peace seemed like a phantom thing that could never be. A great loneliness settled over him.

When he looked up he saw the lights of Bowie Hoskins's ranch. Men with lanterns were moving about in the yard. Riders were coming and going. As he pulled into the yard someone yelled his name. Then Bowie, Captain McNelly, and several other ranchers came running to meet him.

"Chaffee, the man who called himself Lamont, is dead," Delaney told them in a deadly monotone.

"You got him?" McNelly asked grimly.

Delaney swung down. "As he was heading for the Border."

He looked over the heads of the excited men facing him. Nowhere could he spot Jean, or Stoker. Except for McNelly, the men were all talking at

once. There was Mossy Cooper, Long John Pike and Lane Newberry; Sam Whitehead, Bottles Lawrence, Parson Cripps and others. Men whose sons and kin had died, but who now knew the truth.

"Lamont's daughter and the big Irishman are looking all over for you, Tex," Bowie blatted. "And listen!"

"I'd better do the explaining, Hoskins," McNelly said, smiling.

"The real Lamont," Delaney told them, "is at the Circle L, standing guard over the foreman we knew as Chaffee."

"Chaffee?" Bowie echoed, perplexed. "Hell, Tex, I thought you said you just finished Chaffee!"

Delaney made no effort to enlighten the little oldster just then. At his suggestion he, McNelly, and several of the other men mounted and rode to the Circle L. There they found Pierre Lamont and Durk Bullard, whose confession cleared up everything.

Later that night, Captain McNelly said:

"Delaney, Texas needs more men like you. It's a great state with a great future. Chaffee's brand of lawlessness is gone forever. A great injustice was done you, your being imprisoned long after the war was over. But no one was to blame but Captain Strang, who made a personal issue out of your capture. You and Chili Cortina should have been released when peace was declared, as were other prisoners.

"We know now that the real Chaffee killed your father to gain his land and cattle. We know now that he personally led the raids on the trail and on the ranches, to terrorize folks into moving on. And with his cunning he made it appear as if Juan Cortina and his Mexicans were doing it. In checking with Mexican officials, I find you were right. Juan Cortina is in prison in Mexico City, and has been for months. Chaffee's whole rotten scheme was to own and control all of Mustang Valley and, if possible, gain all of Pierre Lamont's holdings. He had crooked helpers in every branch of Lamont's service—boatmen, clerks and teamsters. They'll be rounded up pronto."

Tex stirred restlessly. "But about me stealing the hides—"

"The clerk in Rockport lied himself into prison when he testified that he paid you the money for the wagon train of hides. That money was paid to Chaffee himself. He and some of his men had planned to waylay the train, but Durk Bullard did it his way, hoping to gain Chaffee's favor. Chaffee killed Captain Strang—and just happened to do it the night you escaped with the gun Chili Cortina slipped into the guardhouse window. Strang had ideas of ranching in the valley himself, and Chaffee wanted him out of the way.

"More than that, Chaffee bushwhacked you the night of the pool meeting. Both he and Durk Bullard were afraid of you—afraid you'd get an inkling of their plans. Beneath his smooth talk and polish, Jacques Chaffee was as villianous and as treacherous a criminal as I've ever encountered. Now that the job is done I'd like to shake your hand, Delaney, and wish you well."

His heart too full for words, Delaney gripped the lawman's hand, murmuring the name "Captain McNelly"—a name that will live forever in Texas history. Off to one side stood Tad Hoskins, grinning happily, and sniffing to keep from crying. Delaney already had praised Tad in front of everyone for all he had done. That was one of the biggest moments of the boy's life.

"Delaney and me is pards," Tad whispered to Bottles.

"The hell you are!" said Bottles.

The pool men found where Chaffee had hidden his money—what didn't belong to Pierre Lamont—in a wall safe. It was money that would be evenly divided among them, affording them a fresh start.

Spring rains and a warm sun had made the pastures green. There were longhorns and wild mustangs to be

roped and branded. Someone said a trail to Abilene, Kansas, soon would be opening. There would be no more skinning of cattle for their hides alone. Truly enough, as had been predicted, the hides and tallow factories along the Gulf Coast would rot in their own stench.

There was much that Delaney did not understand even yet, but Bowie did his best to enlighten him.

"Why was we ready for Chaffee's raid, Tex?" he replied to Delaney's first question. "Why, we just put two and two together, son. Captain McNelly figured that would be Chaffee's next move. Each night for a week we been braced for it. Ever since that night you and Tad broke away from McNelly and his men they've watched Chaffee like a hawk. What you told them about Chaffee opened their eyes, I reckon."

"You heard from Starr?" asked Delaney.

"She's in St. Louis, Tex," Bowie said slowly, "and happy, according to the letter I got. I guess that's all that counts."

"That means everything," Delaney told him.

He walked outside where the late night air was clean and fragrant and warm with the breath of an early summer. Now, for the first time since he could remember he knew peace. This valley was his home, and it was a good land. These ranchers who had toughed it out were his friends and neighbors. Then there was Chili. There would be times when the little Mexican and his bright-eyed wife would ride over for visits.

Only one thing was missing. And suddenly she was coming out of the shadows of the trees toward him. Starlight glinted in her dark hair and brightened her eyes. Never before had she looked so lovely, so desirable. All the promised joy a woman can offer a man was reflected in her eyes for Delaney to see.

She smiled softly. "Dad plans to settle here on the ranch, Tex. I'm just wondering if I'll like it here."

"You're bound to, Jean. Dad used to call it God's country, and I guess it still is. Only—

"Only what, Tex?"

"I love you, Jean," he said awkwardly. "I want you to marry me as soon as possible."

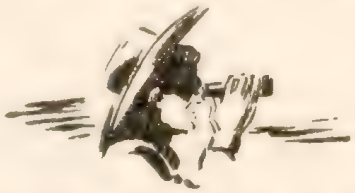
She laughed shakily while tears brimmed in her eyes.

"I thought you'd never ask me, Tex," she whispered. "I know I'll like it here now."

From the gallery, Tad, Stoker, Parson Cripps and Bottles Lawrence saw their shadows merge. Stoker stopped telling them that he reckoned he'd take up ranching and work for Delaney.

"Looks like a job fer the parson, don't it, Bottles?" he asked, grinning.

"Sure does, Stoker. Only call me Ranger. That's my name now—Ranger Lawrence."



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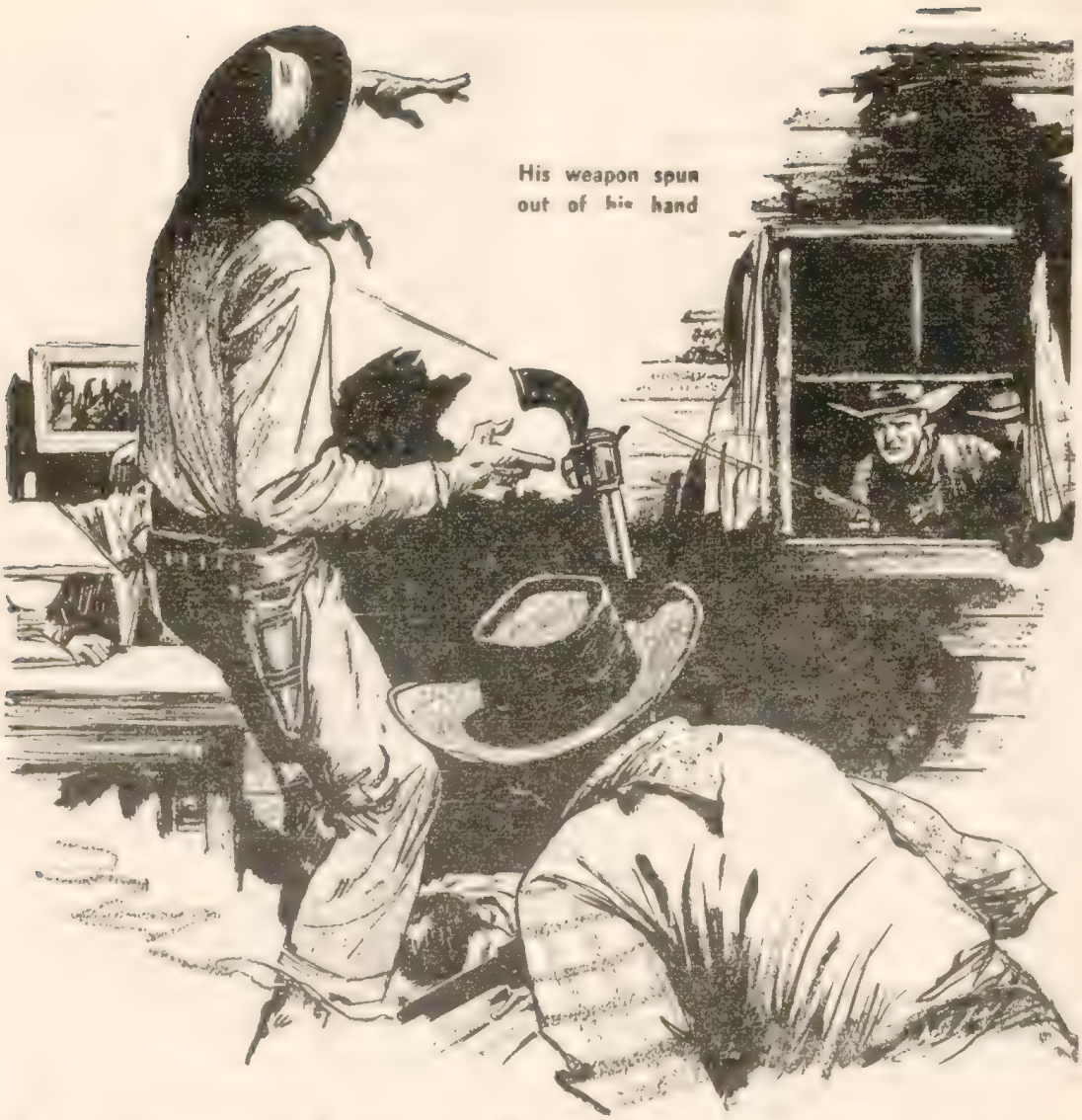

Lone Hand LAW

By WILLIAM L. HOPSON

Sheriff Harrigan knew the right time to let a prisoner escape!

HEAVY RAIN squalls had started old Muleshoe River on the first stages of a rampage. Sheriff Jim Harrigan—better known as Lone Hand—reined in his mount at the edge of the sullen waters to remove the handcuffs from the wrists of dark-faced Henry Moore.

Once, a long time ago, Moore's horse had stepped into a bog hole in this same bend and had gone down, pinning him underneath. Only the quick work of his boyhood chum, young Jim Harrigan, had saved him from drowning.

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And now, Moore was on his way to face trial for the murder of old Jeb Enright.

Harrigan did not dare leave him in the little county seat jail in the town across the river. He would be taken out and lynched, just as another mob had taken Bad Joe Keefer out twenty years before and lynched him in the courthouse yard, killing another and older Sheriff Jim Harrigan to get their man.

"Don't be fool enough to try a break, Henry," Lone Hand Harrigan now warned coldly, as he removed the cuffs. "I'll drop you cold at the first move like that. I'm just seeing that you get a chance, in case your horse loses his feet in this mill race." He stared at Moore. "You're loco not to tell the truth about Patterson hiring you to kill old Jeb, so Patterson could get those water holes he needs so bad in the summer."

The killer looked at the muddy, sullen waters and licked his dry lips. But in the snarl he turned on his former boyhood friend was no fear.

"I'll talk all right!" he sneered at Harrigan. "You go on the stand and identify that Winchester shell of mine and I'll tell about you and me holding up that store over in Arizona seven years ago, when we was on that saddle tramp together!"

The sheriff's lips tightened. He said nothing. Instead, he pushed out into the stream, leading his prisoner's horse by the bit.

They got across without mishap and emerged into the little town of Muleshoe Bend, dripping wet. Through the sullen crowds standing everywhere in the muddy street around the buggy-infested square, Harrigan took his man to the little wooden jail in back of the hotel and left him with garrulous old Deputy Pap Anderson with a promise to send Moore some dry clothes. Then he went on home to change.

At his cabin, Harrigan took just long enough to freshen up and pick up a change of clothes for Henry.

WHEN Harrigan returned, he shouldered his way through the crowd milling in the courthouse yard, past the very tree from which Bad Joe Keefer had been hung. He went into his office on the lower floor of the red stone courthouse building.

"Old Muleshoe's sure rising fast," he heard a rancher named Ed Jameson say just outside his window. "Some of the folks'll have to be getting across before she gets any higher."

"Not me," came the slightly thick voice of another rancher, Big Tom Bostick.

Bostick had been talking a lot about lynching, and he was a bad man when he was drunk. Reports had it that he had killed a man or two on his own.

"I'm staying right here till Lone Hand testifies against Moore," he went on. "And if that crooked lawyer of Patterson's gets an acquittal for Henry Moore, I reckon we'll reverse it with a rope—right out there on that hackberry tree where they hung Bad Joe Keefer twenty years ago. I took part in that."

Harrigan thought, Sure they're waiting for me to testify. They know me and Henry was kids together here in Muleshoe Bend, before he went bad on that trip to Arizona.

He thought about the murder shell he'd found in a brush clump atop a ridge above old Jeb's place while scouting around with grumpy old Pap Anderson. Henry had carelessly levered it from the smoking breech of his heavy Winchester after smashing the bullet through old Jeb's bony back as the rancher stepped out of his cabin. And Henry Moore owned the only .40-.65 repeater in that section of the country.

Through the window, Harrigan saw the big figure of Jake Patterson emerge from the throng in the courtyard, flanked by a ring of his hard-faced, heavily armed riders. They were gunmen all. Roughly they shoved their way into the white-plastered corridor, but Jake Patterson pushed into Harrigan's office alone.

Opulence had caused a slight roundness at the rancher's middle and his jowls had taken on fullness. But there was still boundless strength in his big shoulders and arms.

"Still holding out, eh?" he said, glaring at the sheriff.

"Maybe," Harrigan answered.

"If you go on the stand and identify that shell," the cattleman warned coldly, "people around here are going to find out a lot about you."

Harrigan came slowly to his feet, leaning forward to rest both hands on his desk.

"I wasn't guilty of that hold-up and you know it, Patterson," he said coldly. "What's more, folks wouldn't take the word of a murdering land grabber like you against mine. It's you ought to be on trial this morning for old Jeb's murder. You hired hired Moore to do it—to get Jeb's place now before it reverts to the state."

Patterson's answer was to turn and open the door, yanking in a scrawny-necked little man of fifty-five or sixty who was standing outside.

"Yep, it's him, all right, Mr. Patterson," the man announced without hesitation. "He was with that Moore feller the night they robbed my store seven years ago. He had his gun right on me when Moore whacked me over the head and cleaned out the cash drawer."

Jim Harrigan's lips tightened at the memory of that incident, just as they always did. He and Moore had been just two young hungry saddle tramps that starry evening at dusk, when they had gone into the store. Harrigan had meant to offer his gun for security for some groceries until riding jobs could be found.

But when Harrigan had handed over his weapon, butt end first, his companion had unexpectedly struck the storekeeper over the head with his gun, then scooped up the contents of the cash box, and fled into the night, racing away on his horse.

Harrigan had fled, too, knowing that no jury in the country would believe his story. He had come on back home alone, and the Muleshoe Bend country had seen no more of Moore until word had come that he had slipped back unobtrusively and hired out to Jake Patterson.

THEN, before the sheriff could go after Moore, as a wanted man, Jeb had been killed. Moore had been arrested for murder and the killer was making threats in case his boyhood friend identified that .40-.65 shell.

Now Lone Hand Harrigan looked at the big, ruthless cattleman for whom Henry Moore had worked, and at Patterson's obsequious witness.

"This another of your alibi witnesses for Moore?" the sheriff asked sharply.

"Let's merely say I'm—ah—holding him in reserve," clarified Patterson. Then he swaggered out, apparently heading upstairs for the already crowded courtroom.

Things moved so fast during the trial on that sullen day, that by mid-afternoon Jake Patterson's string of gunhands had gone on the stand, had sworn that Moore was working with them at the time of the murder, and had settled back in their front row seats around the big cattleman as Harrigan was called up by old Zack Rogers, the craggy-faced prosecuting attorney.

A tense silence settled over the big courtroom as the sheriff settled his long frame in the chair, staring at the sea of faces before him. Most tense of all were those men out there who had been forced to accept mealy-mouthed Paterson's offers in his drive for a land path to the river. Others, whose mortgages had been bought from the bank, had bowed grimly to the inevitable, when Harrigan had been forced to foreclose for Jake Patterson.

Rugged old Zack Rogers got down to business with few formalities.

"Are you personally acquainted with the defendant?" Zack asked, after Harrigan had related the details of

finding old Jeb lying face down in a pool of coagulated blood, and of the arrest of Henry Moore at Patterson's ranch the same day.

The prisoner sat sullenly between two deputies, his dark eyes flashing a warning threat at Jim Harrigan.

"We were raised together here in Muleshoe Bend," Harrigan answered.

"You saved him from drowning once, didn't you?" Zack asked.

"Yes," the sheriff said. "His horse stepped in a bog hole while the river was up. He went down, pinning Moore underneath."

Zack picked up the empty shell from where it lay on the table beside the heavy weapon that had exploded it, and brought the exhibit over. It was his show now. After waiting for Carter, the wily lawyer, hired by Patterson, to get through, he was making the most of it.

"This shell," Zack said impressively, "is of an unusual caliber for this section of the country—a forty-sixty-five. It has been proved by cap marks that it was fired by the defendant's weapon there on the table. Sheriff, I want you to tell the jury what you know about it."

There was another moment of tense silence, broken by a movement of the storekeeper Patterson had brought from Arizona. It was the man's way of focusing Harrigan's attention upon him. The sheriff felt his lips tighten, aware of the grim faces before him.

Then he heard his own voice saying, as though from far away, "Why, I reckon I don't know anything about it."

For a split second the spectators were too stunned to move. Then an ominous rumble swept through the assembled cattlemen in the courtroom. It grew to a roar that drowned out the rapping of the judge's gavel. Above the roar came Tom Bostick's bellow and the cry of old Pap Anderson.

"He's lying!" Pap screeched at the top of his lungs. "I was with him when he found it. He's trying to hang the jury!"

Burly Tom Bostick pushed out into the aisle, followed by red-faced Ed Jameson and a dozen others. More followed. The courtroom was in an uproar. Somehow, Harrigan found himself down off the stand, with Henry Moore's sneeringly triumphant face leering up at him. Patterson was smiling his approval.

BECAUSE of the sheriff's unexpected testimony, the trial went to the jury by four o'clock that afternoon. Harrigan got to his prisoner and hustled him out of the courtroom, surrounded by three deputies, including old Pap Anderson. Pap was white-faced with rage at his superior, but was sticking by him. They filed down the aisle and met a block of men in the rallway, led by Tom Bostick and Jameson.

"Get out of the way!" ordered Harrigan, and dropped his hand to his Colt. "You, Tom, get those men clear!"

"You yeller sheep-dog!" roared the beefy-faced Jameson. "There's reports been going around that you might be taking Patterson's pay. But it ain't going to work. If they acquit Moore, we're going to swing him from that hackberry out there where they swung Bad Joe Keefer, and then chase you clean out of the country. You're all through in Muleshoe Bend, Harrigan! Do you hear that?"

With the deputies forming a solid wedge, they drove their way through the crowd, guns out, and hurried the frightened prisoner to the jail. Bostick, Jameson and the others headed for Brady's saloon across the square. Patterson returned to the hotel and wisely remained there alone.

The wrong move by even one man, and Harrigan knew that he would find himself with an open war on his hands, as well as the lynching he knew was being organized. Things were about to pop in Muleshoe Bend!

And by nine o'clock that night, with the jury still hung, the storm broke. Harrigan saw them coming. He was

standing beside Pap Anderson on a bench and looking out through the bars of the jail window, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. At two other windows stood the extra deputies, also armed with the deadly double-barreled weapons. There were about one hundred milling men out there in the darkness.

"What's going on?" demanded Henry Moore's snarling voice for the dozenth time.

The dark-faced killer stood at his darkened cell door, his fingers clutching at the steel bars.

"Don't worry, Henry," Jim Harrigan said grimly. "They're not lynching you tonight. I'm saving you for something better."

"Sure!" gritted the killer savagely. "You're saving me for a legal hanging—just like your father was doing for Bad Joe Keefer. And look what happened! You and me was standing on the hotel porch together—we were kids then—when somebody fired that wild shot that killed your dad. They never found out who. But it downed the sheriff at that very window where you're standing now. And before you could bat an eye they had Bad Joe over in the courtyard, swinging from a high limb of that big hackberry tree. Get me out of here, Lone Hand, before they bust this jail wide open!"

"They got a big twelve by twelve pole for a battering ram," said Pap Anderson, standing beside Harrigan.

From somewhere out of the darkness over to one side a rider on a black horse suddenly plunged toward the jail. The black blob loped up out of the darkness from the direction of Brady's saloon. Harrigan lined the shotgun's muzzle on him, and his command cut through the darkness.

"That's far enough!" he snapped.

The rider was Tom Bostick and he was a bit more sober now. Bostick ignored the command and rode up under the jail window.

"What're you doing here, Tom?" Harrigan demanded sharply. "I thought you were out there heading that mob."

"I aimed to be," answered the big man doggedly, yet there was something in his voice that the sheriff had never heard before. "but when Jameson started rousing that mob a little ago it got me thinking back to a night twenty years ago when another mob was forming out there. Get Moore out of here in a hurry, damn you! I don't like you, Harrigan, but get Moore out of here before they take him. Patterson's riders are out there to help him. Patterson and his lawyer are at his house on the south side of town."

HARRIGAN demanded bluntly, "Since when did you get so considerate over a man who killed your best neighbor, Tom?"

"That—that's got nothing to do with it, Lone Hand. I'm only trying to make up for a mistake. I don't like you and I think you're in Patterson's pay. But it was me that fired that wild shot that killed your father the night they swung Bad Joe Keefer! He screamed, "Now, damn you, will you get the hell out of here?"

He wheeled his horse, spurring away. Jim Harrigan watched him go, and somehow he couldn't find it in his heart to hate Bostick. The rancher was only thinking what most of the others out there thought—that because the sheriff had done his duty and foreclosed mortgaged ranches, and refused to identify the shell that would hang Henry Moore, he was in Jake Patterson's pay.

"So it was Tom who killed your father!" growled Pap Anderson. "I never liked him anyhow.—Well, Lone Hand, here they come!"

Shadowy men were coming quietly, a moving black mass against the lamp-lit hotel windows. Six or eight of them were carrying the pole meant to be used as a battering ram.

"Remember—no shooting!" Jim Harrigan warned the deputies grimly. "Moore's not worth it."

"You ain't fooling me any!" came

Moore's fearful voice from the darkness behind them. "You want 'em to take me. This is an easy out for you, Harrigan. But I'll talk plenty before that rope gets around my neck!"

"Sheriff!" Jameson's drunken voice bellowed from out front. "We want that drygulcher!"

"Better go home and sleep it off, Ed," advised Harrigan. "And that goes for the rest of you."

"We can't go home now!" yelled back a voice. "We're cut off by the river everywhere, except those of us who live south of town. Only a good horse that's a strong swimmer could cross that river now."

The crowd moved right on up to the front of the jail, unmindful of the four shotgun muzzles protruding from the barred windows. Suddenly old Zack Rogers, the prosecuting attorney, pushed his way to the van.

"You're under arrest for inciting a mob, Jameson!" he bellowed, but was quickly grabbed by some of the others. They shoved him back through the crowd, still fighting.

Eight men lined up to swing the pole. It was only then that Harrigan set down his shotgun and turned to his deputy.

"Stall them off a couple of minutes more, Pap," he whispered. "I'll get Moore out the back way to the horses."

He ran to Moore's cell and unlocked it. The killer hurried out, the fear in his face turning to smug triumph.

"I knew you'd see things right, Lone Hand," he chuckled nervously, as they hurriedly pushed along the corridor toward a back door. "Where we going?"

"Back to Acton where I caught you," was the grim reply. "We'll have to swim the Muleshoe. Hurry!"

They were outside now untying the horses which were standing out back.

"The river's rising fast," Moore protested. "We'll never make it."

"Mount your horse!" ordered Harrigan.

He was finishing untying his own mount as he spoke, but the prisoner already was moving. Moore wheeled his horse suddenly and thundered away into the night.

Harrigan's hand flashed to his hip and came up with his Colt. It roared six times. From in front the mob broke for the back of the jail. All that greeted them was the drum of hoofbeats fading into the wet darkness. Harrigan was hard on the heels of his prisoner.

Only minutes later a panting horse thundered up to the spacious yard in front of Jake Patterson's big white house on the south side of town. Running boots hit the front porch and Henry Moore burst into the room, wild-eyed.

PATTERSON shot him a look of surprise, as did the three hard-faced riders who were the rancher's bodyguards.

"How'd you get here?" Patterson demanded sharply.

"I got away from Harrigan when he took me out of the jail from the mob," panted Moore, sweat beading his brow. "He was going to take me back across the river to Acton.—Give me some money quick. I'm hitting south!"

"You fool!" the cattleman grunted contemptuously. "You've ruined everything. Half the jury was mine. Carter and me had it fixed. We'd have got you free in time."

"They're after me, I tell you!" Moore cried hoarsely. "I ain't getting my neck stretched by that mob for you, Jake. I shot Jeb for you and I want what's coming to me!"

"All right, Henry, here it is," snapped the cattleman, his hand sliding beneath his coat. "I'll claim I was stopping a prisoner from making an escape."

His hand came up, not with a wallet, but with a snub-nosed Colt. Its explosive bark mingled with the bleating cry of fright from the lawyer, Carter.

Moore gave a sobbing gasp and

jerked convulsively. Then he went down, dead. Dust flew from the carpet beneath his crumpling fall, a thin trickle of red beginning to work past his dark cheek.

Then Jim Harrigan's voice came from the open window across the room.

"Drop it, Patterson!" he ordered. "You're under arrest for murder!"

But the cattleman didn't submit. He was bawling a warning to his three men when the room was suddenly rocked to the explosions of more guns.

Patterson's Colt went spinning, and a gunhand went down. Flame spurts from the window drove another gunny back against a china closet, and his fall spilled a thousand fragments of broken dishes all over the floor. The third man was down, his arm wobbling crazily, a slug through the shoulder.

Acrid powder smoke filled the room as Harrigan, followed by Zack Rogers, climbed in through the window with a six-shooter in each hand. He sheathed one of them and snapped steel cuffs on the white-faced cattleman's wrists. He said nothing until a rataplan of hoofs announced the arrival of a couple of dozen others who pushed into the room. Bostick and Jameson were with them.

The craggy old prosecuting attorney, who had known Jim Harrigan since his babyhood, looked about, then said mildly, "Well, Lone Hand, I reckon it worked just like you said it would. Though all we figured on was getting evidence that Jake, here, hired Moore to kill old Jeb. But this—" he indicated Henry Moore's body—"makes it a cinch. You'll hang for this, Patterson!"

"Are you telling me that mob business was a frameup?" demanded the cattleman in a strained voice.

Shaggy-haired Zack nodded.

"It was Harrigan's idea," he explained. "Ever since you hired Henry Moore to kill Jeb so you could get his springs, Lone Hand has been planning to get the man really responsible for all the misery in the Muleshoe country. You showed us the way when you threatened to expose him over that stickup business in Arizona —which I've known about for seven years. Your grocery store man just admitted a few minutes ago that Harrigan was handing him his gun butt end first. We've also got all your riders in jail by now, charged with being perjured witnesses."

"Pap Anderson got a bunch of the small ranchers together last night and told them what to do." Harrigan told the rest of the story. "All except Jameson and Bostick, who were to be egged on by the boys. Then I took Henry out back and let him get away, knowing he'd come here. I knew he wouldn't cross the river. You see," he smiled,—"ever since Henry's horse fell and pinned him under that day, he's been afraid of water."

"It wasn't all according to the law, maybe," finished old Zack Rogers. "But we got plenty on you, Jake—" He broke off as a man stuck his head in the door. "What is it, Ike?" Rogers asked quickly.

"The jury," announced the messenger. "They're still hung!"

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The GHOSTS of Buckskin Run

Everybody had Rod Morgan tagged as a killer—but he stubbornly refused to clear out of the canyon country

I

FOR two long days they had seen no other traveler, not even a solitary cowhand or Indian. There had been stops to change teams, an overnight layover at Weston's ranch, but no other break in the long, insufferable monotony of the journey.

There was no comfort in the west-

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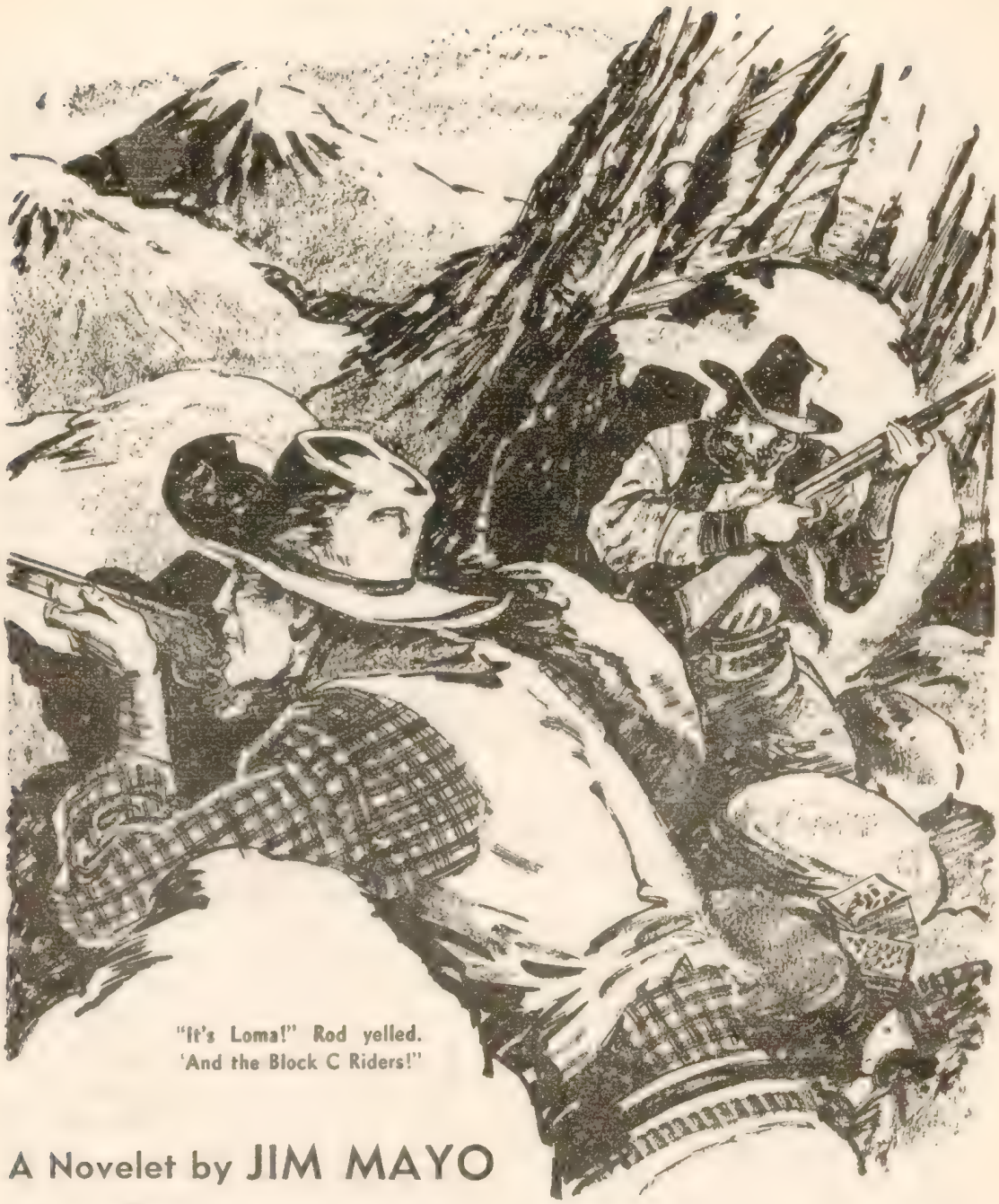

"It's Loma!" Rod yelled. 'And the Block C Riders!"

A Novelet by JIM MAYO

bound stage. The four passengers alternately dozed or stared miserably at the unchanging desert, dancing with heat waves.

No breeze sent a shaft of coolness through the heavy heat of the afternoon. Loma Day, bound for Cordova, a tiny cowtown thirty miles down the trail, felt stifled and unhappy. Her heavy dress was hot, and she knew her hair "looked a fright."

The motion of the heavy, jolting coach had settled a thin mantle of dust over her clothes and skin. The handkerchief with which she occasionally dabbed at her brow or cheeks was long

originally published in May, 1948, Thrilling Ranch Stories

since a miserable wad of cloth.

Across from her, Mrs. Em Shipton, proprietor of Cordova's rooming and boarding establishment, perspired and fanned and dozed. Em Shipton looked at Loma's trim figure with exasperation, for to her the girl looked cool and immaculate. Em Shipton resembled a barrel with ruffles.

Mark Brewer, cattle buyer, touched his mustache thoughtfully and looked again at the girl in the opposite corner of the stage. She was, he decided, almost beautiful. Possibly her mouth was a trifle wide, but her lips were lovely, and she laughed easily.

"I hope," he ventured suddenly, "you decide to stay with us, Miss Day. I am sure the people of Cordova will do all they can to make your visit comfortable."

"Oh, but I intend to stay," she said eagerly. "I'm going to make my home there."

"Then you have relatives there?"

She smiled. "No, I am going to be married."

The smile went out of his eyes, yet hovered politely about his lips. "I see. No doubt I know the lucky fellow. Cordova is not a large town."

Loma hesitated. The assurance with which she had decided on this trip had grown less as she traveled. It had been a long time since she had seen Rod Morgan, and the least she could have done was to have awaited a reply from him. Yet there had been no place to wait. Her aunt was dead, they had no friends in Richmond, and she had but little money. It was a matter of going at once or not at all, yet the closer she came to Cordova, the more uncertain she became.

SHE looked at Brewer. "Oh, yes? Then you probably know him. His name is Roderick Morgan."

Em Shipton stiffened, and Mark Brewer's eyes narrowed sharply. Alarmed at their reaction, Loma glanced quickly from one to the other.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong?" Em Shipton had never been tactful. "Why, I should say there is! Rod Morgan is a murderer! He's an awful, insufferable person! Young lady, what in the world can you be thinking of coming all the way out here to marry a man like that? If you —"

"Please, Em," Brewer interrupted. "Remember you are speaking of Miss Day's fiancé. Of course, I'll admit it is rather a shock. How long since you've seen him, Miss Day?"

"Two years." Loma's face was pale, and she felt faint.

Oh, if anything was wrong now! All through her aunt's illness the memory of Rod's love for her had seemed like a pillar of rock, the one substantial thing in a crumbling world. He had always been the one person to whom she had known she could turn.

"That explains it," Brewer said, nodding sympathetically. "A great deal can happen in two years. You haven't been told, I suppose, about the murders in Buckskin Run?"

"No." She looked puzzled. "What's Buckskin Run?"

"Well, it's a stream, as the name implies, but we use it here to designate the canyons through which the stream runs, as well as the stream. The stream is clear and cold, and it heads far up in the mountains, but the canyon is a strange, mysterious sort of place which all decent people have come to avoid like the plague. For years the place has been considered haunted, and there are some unexplained graves in the canyon. Men have died there under mysterious circumstances. When Rod Morgan moved into the valley, he built a cabin there."

"You—you spoke of murders?"

"Yes, I did. About a year ago Rod Morgan had trouble with a man named Ad Tolbert. A few days later a cowhand found Tolbert's body not far from Morgan's cabin. He had been shot—in the back."

"That was only one of them!" Em

Shipton declared. "Tell her about that old pack peddler."

Mark Brewer nodded. "His name was Ned Weisl. He was a harmless old fellow, and for years he had been peddling around the country, and on every trip he went into Buckskin Run. People warned him about it, but he kept going back and he used to repeat some wild story about gold being buried there. About a month ago they found him dead in Buckskin Run. He had been shot in the back, also."

"You mark my words!" Em Shipton declared positively. "That young Morgan's behind it all!"

"It appears to me," the fourth passenger, a big, bearded man, interrupted, "that you're condemning this man without much reason. Anybody ever see him shoot anybody?"

"Reason?" Em Shipton flared angrily. "Who else would go into that awful place? Everybody knows it's haunted. We warned young Morgan about it, but he was too smart, a know-it-all. He said that talk about ghosts was silly, and that if there were ghosts he'd make 'em feel at home! We thought it funny, him going into that dark, lonely place. No wonder. He's deep, he is! And has a sight of crime behind him, too."

"He has not!" Loma flared. "I've know Rod Morgan for years. There isn't a nicer boy anywhere."

Em Shipton's face stiffened. A dictator in her own little world, she resented any contradiction of her opinion.

"I reckon, young lady," she said, "you've got a lot to learn. And you'll learn it before long, mark my words!"

"There's something in what Mrs. Shipton says," Brewer said. "Morgan does have a bad reputation around Cordova. He was offered a good riding job by Henry Childs when he first arrived and he refused it. Childs is a pioneer, and one of the wealthiest and most respected men in the country. That refusal aroused some suspicion, for why would Morgan want to live in that haunted canyon alone when he could have held a good job with Childs?"

"Maybe he likes to be independent," the bearded man suggested, staring at Brewer. "Maybe he was building his own ranch."

MARK BREWER frowned, but ignored the big man. "The canyon has always had an evil reputation," he went on. "Vanishing wagon trains, mysterious deaths, and it is said that even Indians avoided the place." Brewer shrugged. "After all, you've only one life to live, Miss Day. Why not make some inquiries around before you commit yourself to any course of action?"

Loma Day stared out over the desert. She could not argue with them, for she knew nothing about what they were saying. She knew Rod, but two years *is* a long time, and so much could happen.

He had come West to earn money so they could be married, and it seemed unlikely that he would think of making a home for her in a haunted valley. He was, she knew, apt to be hotheaded and impulsive, but murder! How could she believe that of him?

"Don't make no man a murderer because he lives in a nice little valley like Buckskin Run," the bearded man stated flatly. "You make your inquiries by all means, ma'am, but don't you go taking no person's word for another man on no evidence like that. It's a fine little valley, I'd say."

Mark Brewer turned and looked at him then, for the first time. "What do you know about Buckskin Run?" he demanded. "It's a dangerous place!"

"Bah!" The bearded man was contemptuous. "I've been through it more'n once. I went through that valley years ago, before your man Childs was ever out here. Pioneer, is he? I never heard of him. There wasn't a ranch in this country when I first came in here, and as far as the Indians are concerned, that Buckskin

Run canyon was medicine ground. That's why they never went there."

"How do you explain the things that have happened there?"

"I don't explain 'em. There's been killings all over the West, and will be as long as there's badmen left. There was white men enough around here when I was first here—renegades most of 'em—but nobody ever heard tell of no haunted valley, them days. Men like Tarran Kopp camped in that valley many's the time."

Brewer stared thoughtfully at the big man. "You were here when Kopp's gang was still running? "

"I was that! Knowed him well. I was through this country before that, too. Come through with Kit Carson and was with him when he named that stream the Buckskin Run. My name's Jed Blue, and my feet made trails all over this country. As for your man Morgan, I know nothing about him, but if he's had the sense to stake a claim in Buckskin Run canyon, he's smart enough, I'll bet. That's the best growing land around here."

Em Shipton glared at Jed Blue. "A lot you know about it! That valley is a wicked place. It's haunted, and everybody from Cordova to Santa Fé knows it. What about the wagon trains that went into it and disappeared! What about the graves there? Three men buried side by each, and what does it say over them? 'No visible cause of death on these bodies,' that's what!"

The Concord rumbled through a dry wash, then mounted the opposite bank with a jerk, bumped over a rock in the trail, then slowed to climb a steep, winding grade.

Talk died as suddenly as it had begun, and Loma clenched her hands tightly in her lap, trying to fight back the wave of panic that mounted within her.

If Rod was what they said he was, what would she do? Her money was almost gone, and she would be fortunate if it lasted more than a week at most. But had she remained in the East, what could she have done there? To be broke was as bad in one place as another.

Yet despite the assurance with which they had spoken, she could not believe that Rod was a murderer. Remembering his fine, clean-cut face, his clear, dark eyes, and his quick, flashing smile, she shook her head, unbelieving. It simply could not be!

THE Concord groaned to the top of the grade, and the six horses swung wide around a curve, straightened out, and began to move faster and faster. They stopped so suddenly that she scarcely heard the shot outside, and the sharp yell. She was thrown forward, almost into Em Shipton's lap. She recovered herself and peered excitedly out of the window.

A man lay flat in the center of the road, blood staining the back of his vest. Beside his right hand was a six-shooter.

To the left of the road there were four riders, sitting their horses with their hands uplifted. Facing the four men from the right side of the road was a young man with wavy dark, hair blowing in the wind. He wore rough jeans, star boots, and a black-and-white checked shirt. There were two holsters low on his hips, but they were empty. The guns were in his hands—trained on the four riders.

"Now pick up your man and get out of here!" his voice cracked like a whip. "You asked for it and you got it!"

II

LOMA stared, her face turning white and her heart sinking.

"Rod!" she gasped. "Rod Morgan!"

Her voice was low, but Jeb Blue heard her.

"Is that your man?" he demanded.

She nodded, voiceless. It was true, then, she was thinking. He *is* a killer! He has just killed that man.

One of the horsemen caught up the

riderless horse, and two of the others dismounted to load the body across the saddle. The other man sat still, holding his hand on the pommel of the saddle.

As the other riders remounted, he said with a sneer, "Well, here's one you won't bury in Buckskin Run!"

"Get going!" Morgan said sharply. "And keep a civil tongue in your head, Jeff! I've no use for you or any of that rustling drygulching crowd you're riding with. Now, ride!"

Loma Day drew back into the stage, putting her hands to her face. Horror filled her. That limp, still body!

"Well!" Em Shipton said triumphantly. "What did we tell you?"

"It's too bad you had to see this," Brewer said. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Right pert young fellow!" Blue exclaimed admiringly. "Looks to me like you picked a good one, ma'am. Stood off the five of them, he did, and I never seen it done better. Any one of them would have shot his head off if they'd had a chance, but he didn't even disarm 'em. And they wanted no part of him!"

The stage started to roll.

"Hey?" Blue asked Loma in amazement. "Ain't you even going to call him? Ain't you going to let him know you're here?"

"No!" she said, and pleaded, "Don't tell him! Please don't!"

Blue leaned back in his seat, disgusted. "Well, I swan!" he said. "A right smart hand with a shooting iron, I'd say! That hombre in the road had been drilled plumb center!"

Loma did not hear him. Rod—her Rod! A murderer! A Killer!

As the stage pulled away, back on the road Rod Morgan watched the vehicle roll down the grade, then he stooped and retrieved the dead man's gun. No use wasting a good gun, and if things went on as they were going now, he might need it.

He walked back to where his gray mustang was tethered and swung into saddle. After a quick look around, he started up the canyon. There was so much to do and so little time.

Perhaps he had been wrong to try to fight the ingrained superstition and suspicion of the Cordova country. But a man working only as a cowhand could never hope to earn money enough to support a wife or to build any kind of future. Buckskin Run, and its promise, had seemed to him the epitome of all he had dreamed.

The stream boiled down happily over the stones, falling in a series of miniature cascades and rapids into a wide basin surrounded by towering black cliffs. Then it flowed out of that basin and down through a wide meadow, several hundred acres of beautiful grassland. High cliffs lifted abruptly from the edge of the meadow, and it was dotted here and there by small clumps of poplar and spruce.

Below the first meadow lay a long valley bounded by high cliffs, and a half-mile wide at most places. Then it narrowed sharply into a bottleneck that spilled the stream into another series of rapids before it swung out into the timbered land that bordered the desert. The trail out of Buckskin Run ran down through that bottleneck and alongside the stream.

When he had found Buckskin Run there had been no cattle around, no tracks of cattle or horses. Without

asking any questions, he had chosen a site for his cabin near the entrance and had gone to work. Before he rode out to Cordova on his first trip, his cabin was built, his corrals ready.

In Cordova he had run into trouble. And with Em Shipton.

Em was a woman whose entire life was ruled by prejudice and superstition. She had come to Cordova from the hills of West Virginia, by way of Council Bluffs and Santa Fé. In the Iowa town she had married Josh Shipton, a teamster who was freighting over the Santa Fé Trail. She had already been a widow, her first husband having dropped out of sight in a blast of gunfire after an altercation with his brother-in-law.

JOSH SHIPTON was more enduring and also somewhat faster with a gun than Em's previous spouse. He stood her nagging and suspicion for three months, stood the borrowing and drunkenness of her brother for a few days longer. The two difficulties came to a head almost simultaneously. Josh deserted Em, and in a final dispute with her pistol-ready brother, eliminated him from any further interference in Em Shipton's marital affairs. But Josh kept on going.

Em Shipton had come on to Cordova and started her rooming and boarding house while looking around for a new husband. Her first choice, old Henry Childs himself, was a confirmed bachelor who came once to eat at her table and, wiser than most, never came again. She was fifteen years older and twenty pounds heavier than slim, handsome Rod Morgan, but he was her second choice.

"What you need, she had told him, "is a good wife!"

Unaware of the direction of the conversation, Rod had agreed that he did.

"Also," she had added, "you must move away from that awful canyon. It's haunted!"

Rod laughed heartily. "Sure, I've seen no ghost, ma'am. Not a one. Never seen a prettier valley, either. No, I'm staying."

Em Shipton coupled her ignorance with assurance. Women were scarce in the West, and she had come to consider herself quite a catch. She hadn't learned that women weren't quite that scarce.

"Well, she said definitely, "you can't expect me to go and live in no valley like that.

Rod had stared at her with his mouth open. "Who said anything—" He swallowed, tried to keep a straight face, and failed. He did stifle the laugh that started, but not the smile. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I like living there, and as for a wife, I've got my own plans."

Em might have forgiven the plans, but she could never forgive that single, startled instant when Rod had realized that Em Shipton actually had plans for him herself, or the way he had smiled at the idea.

That was nothing. Rod Morgan had walked down to the Gem Saloon, had a drink, and had been offered a job by Henry Childs's foreman, Jake Sarran. He'd refused it.

"Better take it, Morgan," Sarran had said, "if you want to stay in this country. We don't like no loose hands running around the country."

"I'm no loose hand," Rod had assured. "I've got my own place in Buckskin Run."

"I know," Sarran had admitted, "but nobody stays there long, and you won't. Why not take a good job when you can get it?"

"Because," Rod had said simply, "I don't want it. I'm staying at Buckskin Run." As he turned away, a thought had struck him. He turned and glanced back. "And you can tell whoever it is wants me out of there so bad that I'm there to stay."

Jake Sarran had set his glass down hard, but he'd said nothing. Rod left the saloon with his brow furrowed. Before he left town, he'd realized that his being at Buckskin Run definitely

disturbed some people.

For a week he'd kept busy at the ranch, and in that time saw no one. Then he'd ridden south, hired a couple of hands from his small store of cash, and driven three hundred head of white-face cattle back to Buckskin Run. Then he'd let the hands go. He was not worried about the cattle. With grass and water, they would not stray, and there was no grass better than what he had.

When he went to Cordova again, he found people avoiding him. Yet he was undisturbed. Many communities are shy about accepting strangers, and he had violated one of their tabus. It wasn't until he had mounted his horse to leave town and go home that he'd found his troubles wouldn't stop with people merely ignoring him. A sack of flour tied behind his saddle had been cut open, and most of the flour had trickled out on the ground.

ANGERED, he'd wheeled to face the group of men seated along the walk. One of them, Bob Carr, a long, rangy rider from Henry Childs's Block C, had a smudge of white near his pocket, the sort of smudge a man might have got if he had cut a sack open, a flour sack, and then shoved the knife back into his pocket.

Rod had stepped up on the walk. "How'd you get that white spot on your pocket?"

The rider looked down, turned red, and then looked up. "How do you think?" he'd asked, sneering.

Rod hit him. He threw his fist from where it was, at his belt, threw it short and hard into the long-legged rider's stomach.

"Get him, Bob!" somebody had shouted.

But Bob's wind had been knocked out of him, and when he'd opened his mouth to gasp for air, Rod Morgan broke his jaw with a right.

When Rod Morgan had ridden out of town ten minutes after that he'd known he had opened a feud with the Block C. It was a fight he did not want and had no time for, but he had it, whether he liked it or not.

After that, things had moved swiftly. A warning was posted on his door to get out and stay out. His house was set afire and most of his gear burned. Some of his cattle were run off.

Ad Tolbert picked a fight with him and got whipped for his trouble, but a few days later Tolbert was murdered in Buckskin Run. Yet Rod stayed on. He packed a gun now wherever he went, but he stayed.

Behind it all there was some malignant influence, he knew, but there was more. For stories had circulated about him, and like any person who is different or who lives alone, he became suspect to a number of people who had never even seen him.

Then two things happened. He received the letter from Loma Day, and Ned Weisl came to the canyon. He'd hesitated to tell Loma to come West when he knew the trouble he faced, yet he knew what her situation must be. He had written her, explaining what he could, and inviting her to come.

III

WEISL had been a strange little man. Strange, yet charming and interesting. From the first, he and Rod had hit it off, and so he'd told Rod about the gold.

"Three men had come West together," Weisl had told him, "and somewhere out in Nevada they struck it rich. They were reported to have around one hundred and twenty thousand in gold when they started back. They built a special wagon with a false bottom where they hid the gold, then with three wagons, they headed for home.

"They got as far as Buckskin Run, and there, according to the story, Tarran Kopp and his gang hit them. All three were killed, and that was the end of it. But there's another story. One

of Kopp's gang was a friend of mine years later, and when I asked him about it, he said *they* had never killed anybody or stolen any gold in Buckskin Run. At the time, they were clear up in Montana near Bannock."

"What became of the gold?" Rod had asked. "Who did kill them?"

"That is the question," Weisl said shrewdly. "Nobody knows who killed them or how. Nobody knows what became of the gold, either. Now, one hundred and twenty thousand dollars in gold isn't the easiest thing in the world to carry around a country where people are inclined to be curious. That could run close to three hundred pounds, you know. "Some people who were a heap interested in that gold swear it never got out of that canyon. There are others who swear that nobody went into the canyon from the lower end. Nobody knows who buried the three who died there. Markers were set over each grave, and on the markers were the words you may have seen—'No visible mark of death on these bodies'."

"What do you think?"

"That," Weisl had said, smiling, "is another question, but I've an idea and a fantastic one. You hold the land now. Will you let me look around? I'll give you a third of whatever I find."

Rod had grinned. "Make it half," he said.

Weisl shrugged. "Why not? There will be enough for both."

Ned Weisl had not returned to the cabin, so Rod had gone out to look for him. He had not distrusted the little man but he was worried.

He found Ned Weisl—dead. He had been shot in the back.

Rod Morgan knew he was believed guilty of that murder as well as of the killing of Ad Tolbert. No one accused him, although veiled references were made, yet until today in the trail, he had not been directly accused.

He had ridden through the bottleneck and down to the stage trail, intending to ask the driver to let him know when Loma arrived, although she could no more than have his letter by now.

The five riders had been about to ride into the bottleneck. Jeff Cordell was in the lead, and he was sided by Reuben Hart. Hart had the name of being a bad man with a gun, so he was the man Morgan watched.

"Howdy!" he'd said briefly.

"We're hunting strays," Cordell said. "We thought we'd look you over."

"You asking me or telling me?"

"We're telling you." Jeff Cordell's voice was flat and hard. "We don't need to ask."

"Then you've gone as far as you go. No cattle came in here. I've got the neck fenced. Any time you want to have a look around, ask me, and come when I'm home."

"We're going in now," Cordell had said," and if you're smart, you'll stand aside."

"I'm not smart." Rod Morgan had sat on his horse calmly. Inside he was jumpy and on edge, but he looked cool and undisturbed. "I'm the kind of a man who would make you ride in over at least three dead bodies."

CORDELL had hesitated. He was no fool. Rod Morgan had sprung a surprise on Bob Carr and whipped him. He had taken a gun away from Ad Tolbert and whipped him. He was sitting tight now, and Jeff Cordell was a poker player. He believed he could tell when a man was bluffing and he didn't think Rod Morgan was. Also, he was aware that if anybody died, he was almost sure to be the one.

"Let me take him." Reuben Hart had shoved his horse to the fore. "I never did like you, Morgan. I think you're bluffing. I think you're yellow!"

Reuben had gone for his gun while he was speaking, and Reuben was a fast man.

It had been too quick for Cordell or the others. They were cowhands, not gunfighters. They could sling a gun

somewhat, but they were not in the class of Reuben or Dally Hart. They had known then that they weren't in the class with Rod Morgan, for he had drawn and fired so fast his shot hit Hart even as his gun cleared the holster. Reuben Hart had toppled from his horse, dead before he hit the ground. And Rod Morgan had sat there, looking at them over his guns.

Jeff Cordell had noticed another thing. Morgan's gray mustang had stood stock still when Rod fired. Jeff knew very well that his own bronc wouldn't do that, and he had known it would be like shooting ducks in a barrel for a fast man with a horse like that.

The arrival of the stage had saved their faces, and they had loaded Hart up and started for home.

Andy Shank expressed an opinion they were all beginning to share. "You know," he said when they had ridden a couple of miles, "I believe that hombre aims to stay."

Nobody said anything, but Andy wasn't easily squelched. "Anyway," he added, "he seemed right serious about it."

But Andy had never liked Reuben Hart, anyway.

"He may have to stay," Jeff had said drily. "Reub wasn't nowhere near the gunhand Dally is, and Dally will be riding to Buckskin Run. . . ."

At his ranch, Rod Morgan stripped the saddle from the gray and turned it into the corral. Then he carried the saddle into the log barn and threw it over a rail.

The house was silent, and he walked up to it glumly. Maybe one of these days soon Loma would be here to greet him. Would she like Buckskin Run? Or would she be afraid?

He loved the place. Stopping on the porch he had built, he looked back toward the bottleneck, a good six hundred yards away. Green grass rolled easily under the slight wind, and the Run, about fifty yards from the house, could be heard plainly. The high rock walls of the canyon made the shadows come early, but the canyon was singularly beautiful in any light.

He turned inside and began preparing his supper. He knew perfectly what would happen now. Few as were the people to whom he had talked, care had been taken to tell him about the Hart boys. In fact, he had practically been threatened by them. Now he had killed Reuben, and that would mean that trouble with Dally was sure to come.

The Block C had been against him from the start, so that part would make little change. Why were they against him? Did they have the same clannish dislike of strangers that made some others dislike him? Or was there some other, deeper reason?

Ned Weisl's talk had disturbed him. Who had killed the three travelers? What had become of their wagons? What had become of the gold? Who had buried the murdered men? And what became of the killers?

A few things he had learned. Several of the stories about him, other than those from the malicious tongue of Em Shipton, had come from the Block C, and apparently from Henry Childs, a man he had never seen. He was aware, too, that Mark Brewer wanted him off the Buckskin Run. Brewer had even gone so far as to offer him a nice little ranch some distance away from the Run for a reasonable price.

ROD MORGAN was sure of one thing—that behind all the smoke there was some fire, behind the mystery of Buckskin Run there was some-

thing tangible, something that could be gained.

When morning came again, he saddled the gray and rode toward the upper end of the canyon where the dark pool of water invited the flow down from the mountains. He had seen the three graves there and he had glanced at them carelessly, but he had never looked around. Nevertheless, they seemed in some way to tie in with the ghosts that haunted Buckskin Run.

Why had Weisl been murdered? Merely to cause trouble for him? Morgan doubted that. Or could it have been because the little peddler was dangerously close to a secret that no one wanted him to uncover?

What utterly fantastic idea had Weisl had at the end? Rod Morgan wished desperately that he knew, for he believed that fantastic idea must have been somewhere close to the truth.

He swung down from the gray and walked over to the graves. Three of them, side by side, each marked with the name of the man lying there, and each labeled with that queer statement. Bodies found without a mark anywhere. He read the names again:

NAT TENEDOU—HARRY KIDD—
JOHN COONEY

"Well, what do you make of it?"

A voice cut into Rod's speculations and he stiffened, then relaxed warily. His eyes lifted, and he saw a man sitting on a rock across the pool. He was a long, lean man with a red mustache. He must have moved like a ghost to reach that place, for Rod was sure he had not been there a few minutes ago.

"Who are you?" Rod asked. "Where did you come from?"

The man jerked a thumb up the cliffs. "Come down from up yonder. Reckon I always intended to have a look at the place." He nodded his head toward the graves. "I knowed that Kidd. Big man, he was, right powerful. Don't do a body no good to be powerful when a bullet hits him, I reckon."

"What are you doing here?"

The man grinned slyly. "Well, I reckon same as you—a-hunting that there gold. I don't reckon she was ever took out'n this here canyon. And what became of those wagons? Three big wagons. I seen 'em."

"You seem to know a lot about this," Rod said.

"Son, them days there wasn't nothing went on Josh Shipton didn't know."

"Josh Shipton?" Rod gasped. Then he grinned and asked, "Is that your name?"

"Reckon 'tis." Josh eyed him suspiciously. "Where'd you hear it?"

"There's a woman in town says she was married to you."

Josh sprang to his feet so quickly he almost slipped into the basin.

"Em? Here?" He stared, chewing his mustache. "That sure does beat all! Son, don't you go to telling folks you seen me. Not her, anyways! That woman'd be the death of a man! Nagging, suspicious sort of critter, she is!" He spat, then squinted his eyes at Morgan. "She married again? She's a marrying woman, that one."

"Not yet," Rod said, "but I hear she's got Henry Childs somewhat on her mind."

"Childs?" Josh nodded thoughtfully. "Reckon she would. She's money hungry, that woman." Then he chuckled. "Hee, hee! I reckon that would serve old Henry right if she trapped him!"

"You know him, too?"

Shipton's face stiffened, and his eyes glinted with suspicion or some kindred emotion. "Me? No, I don't know him. Don't know nothing about him." He added, "Ain't safe to know."

"He's just a rancher, isn't he?" Rod queried.

Shipton shrugged. "Maybe he is, maybe he ain't. Some folks are powerful unpleasant about folks asking questions."

IV

NOTHING was to be gained with Josh Shipton present. Yet Rod had the feeling that somewhere in the vicinity of the basin he would find a clue to the mystery of Buckskin Run. Those wagons had to go somewhere. Thoughtfully, he gazed at the cliffs. It would have taken an army of men or many teams to draw those wagons up that sheer cliff. It would be dead weight and a straight lift. They would have to use blocks and tackles, and even then the job would be terrific. No, that was out of the question.

Yet the cascades that poured the stream into the basin could not be negotiated even by a canoe, let alone a wagon.

He waved good-by to Josh Shipton and rode back down the canyon, studying the walls more closely. When he arrived at his cabin, he was sure of something else. Those wagons had either gone out the main entrance or they had never gone away at all. And he had an idea that was the answer. The wagons were still here and so was the gold.

He rode up in front of his cabin and swung down. Only then did he see the big, bearded man sitting on the bench in the shade of the house. He dropped his hands and turned.

The man shook his head. "Don't get proddy, Morgan. I'm a friendly visitor."

"That would be a change, anyway." Rod walked toward the man whose eyes *were* friendly. And he had a big, easy-going-looking face that broke into a smile quickly.

Yet Rod Morgan knew a dangerous man when he saw one, and this big man could be just as dangerous as any man alive when he was aroused. The fellow chuckled.

"My name's Jed Blue," he said. "I'm an old-timer hereabouts. Don't reckon you've heard tell of me because I've been gone for a while. Used to trap in this country. Came through here with Carson, first time."

"Had anything to eat?" Rod asked.

"Well"—Blue glanced at the height of the sun—"reckon I could handle some grub." He got up and followed Morgan inside. "You've made a lot of enemies around here, son."

"I didn't ask for 'em," Rod said grimly. "They can have it the way they want it."

"That was a nice gun job you did on Reuben Hart," Blue remarked. "Don't know's I ever saw a slicker."

"You saw that? Where were you? On the stage?"

"Uh-huh. There was some other folks on it, too. Woman name of Em Shipton"—Blue grinned at Rod's expression—"and a hombre named Brewer. They'd been up to Santa Fé." He hesitated, then he said slowly, "There was a girl on that stage, too. Name of Loma Day."

Rod Morgan dropped the fork he was holding and whirled.

"Loma? Here? But how—I don't get it."

"She told us something about it—that she had come on without waiting for an answer to a letter she wrote. She was in a powerful hurry."

"But if she was on that stage, she must have seen me!" Rod exclaimed. "Why didn't she say something?"

Jed Blue was slicing some pieces of beef from a chunk on the table. "You know, son, womenfolks are powerful different than men. Especially womenfolks from back East. She seen you kill that man, and she reckoned you'd changed into a plumb bad hombre. Of course, that killing was only part of it. That Shipton woman and Mark Brewer had been telling her what a badman you were, so when the killing happened, it just offered proof to whatever they said. She's in Cordova now. I figured I'd better tell you so's you'd know and be prepared. She may not welcome you with no open arms."

He paused thoughtfully for a mo-

ment, then added, "I figure that Brewer has some ideas of his own. He's a good-looking man, and she's a mighty pretty girl. He's a man usually gets what he wants, too." Blue glanced sharply at Morgan. "Know anything about him? Does he ever wear a gun?"

"Never saw him wear one. Why?"

"Just wondering. He reminds me a lot of an hombre I seen once a long time ago."

WHEN they were eating, Rod looked up as a sudden idea struck him.

"You didn't ride clear out here just to tell me that, did you?" he asked.

Jed Blue tipped back in his chair, his huge body dwarfing the table at which he was seated. "Reckon I didn't, son," he said. "I was sort of looking over the lay of the land hereabouts."

"In other words, you're gold-hunting."

Blue chuckled. "Right on the point, ain't you? I like that. I like a man as speaks his mind. And if I find it, what then?"

"You keep half."

Blue laughed until his stomach shook. "You do speak out. What if I didn't aim to give you none of it?"

Rod Morgan laid both hands on the table and his eyes were hard. "Friend," he said evenly, "I'm grateful for what you've told me about my girl being in Cordova, but half of that gold is enough for any man. The gold is on my land, and if you find it, you can have half. If you try to get out of here with all of it, you'll have to shoot your way out."

Blue grinned. "I reckon you mean what you say," he said. "Of course, you might not find it as easy with me as with Hart. I shuck a gun pretty fast myself." He cut off another slice of beef and put it between two slabs of bread, then filled his cup. "What you going to do with your half?"

"Buy cattle, stock this place, fix it up some better, then hire a few hands."

Blue nodded approvingly. "Right canny," he agreed, "right canny." He looked at Rod thoughtfully. "Don't want a pardner, do you? I'd like to work into a set-up like this. I'm a tophand, even if I am a shade older than you."

"I'd have to think about that," Rod said. He looked at the big man again. He had the feeling that the man was much deeper than he seemed, yet he also had the idea that he would be a square shooter. "It might be a good idea, at that. But I wouldn't take any man in with me who didn't understand what he was going into."

"Son," Blue said, "don't you pay that no mind. I've had wool in my teeth. I'm no trouble hunter, but I've stood alone many's the time, and when I'm pushed, I can back my play. You and me together could make Cordova eat its words, and for one, I'd like to see it done."

Rod shoved back his chair. "I'm riding to town now. Want to come along?"

Jed Blue picked his teeth thoughtfully with a straw. He nodded. "Reckon I would," he said. "Reckon I would."

When they rode out of the bottleneck, Blue glanced over at Rod. "There's a passel of mavericks over in the brakes east of here, and a couple of good men could build up a herd mighty fast."

Morgan grinned. "That's a good way to get a chance to make hair bridles," he said. "They'd have us in a rock-walled garden if we started that."

"No," Blue said seriously, "most of this stock is over a year old and unbranded. That's for anybody. We could move into those brakes for a few weeks of hard work, then drive the herd back to Buckskin Run, fatten them up, and drive them over the trail to market. Then we'd have some working capital."

"Might be an idea, at that."

They mounted and rode toward

town in silence, Rod preoccupied with thoughts of Loma. It had been two years since he had seen her, but now that she was near, he felt all jumpy and strange inside. He knew suddenly that he wanted her more than anything in life, and realized how much he had been stifling the thought of her so that he might work and build for the time when they could be together. Now she had come West to join him, and her mind had been poisoned against him.

CORDOVA lay flat and still in a baking sun. The mountains drew back disdainfully from the desert town and left it to fry in its own dust and sweat. A spring wagon was drawn up before the general store, and a half-dozen horses stood three-legged at the hitch-rail in front of the Gem Saloon. Jed Blue glanced over at Rod.

"Reckon she'll be at Em Shipton's, Rod. Want me to ride along?"

Morgan shrugged. "Wait for me at the Gem, if you want. And if you can stand that whisky. It's worse'n Indian whisky. I think he makes it out of alkali water, alcohol, plug tobacco, and soap, but a man can cut the dust with it."

Swinging the gray toward Em Shipton's, he felt all tight inside as he dismounted and tied the horse to a feeble-looking cottonwood and went up the slatted walk to the door. He opened it and stepped inside.

Loma was standing at the end of the table in the sitting room and close beside her, evidently in the midst of serious talk, was Mark Brewer.

"Rod!" she cried, and turned toward him, her eyes bright. "Oh, Rod!"

Yet even as he moved toward her, he saw her eyes change. They fell to his guns, then lifted.

He took her hands. "It has been a long time," he said softly. "Too long."

Loma seemed uncertain. She turned her face away. "Mark," she said, her voice low, "have you met Rod Morgan?"

"No," Brewer said, "I haven't, but I've heard a lot about him. How are you, Morgan?"

Rod nodded. She had called him "Mark." "Very well, thanks." He spoke more shortly than he had intended.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Morgan," Brewer said. "You know Dally Hart is gunning for you."

"Is he?" Rod smiled. Loma's hands had gone cold in his. She withdrew them gently. "But that isn't unusual in Cordova, is it? Someone has been gunning for me ever since I came, and I don't mean Hart, either. Nor any of the small fry."

"Who do you mean?" Brewer demanded.

"If I knew that," Rod said, "I'd go call on him and ask him some questions.—Now would you mind leaving us alone? I'd like to talk to Loma."

Mark smiled, his eyes triumphant. "No. Why should I leave you alone? Miss Day is to be my wife."

V

ROD felt as if somebody had kicked him. His face paled, and he went sick inside. Unbelievingly he turned his eyes to Loma's. Hers fell before his, her expression miserable. Then she looked up.

"Rod," she said quickly, "I want you to understand. I like you ever so much, but all this killing—I couldn't stand it, and Mark has been so nice, and I hadn't seen you, and—"

"Don't try to explain," he said bitterly. "You're as bad as the rest of them." He looked up. "As for you, Brewer," he snapped, "you've done your work well. You've taken advantage of the fact that Loma doesn't understand the West. You sneaked and connived and probably lied."

Mark Brewer's face was cold, but he shook his head. "Don't try to bully me into a shooting, Morgan!"

he said. "I'm not wearing a gun!"

Loma's eyes were blazing. "Rod Morgan! To think that you would talk like that. Mark hasn't lied. He's been honest and sincere. He told me not to believe all they said about you. He told me to wait and ask! To see what others thought of you—men like Henry Childs, the big rancher!"

"Childs?" Rod stared at her. "Childs, did you say? Didn't you know it's the Block C, his ranch, that's been fighting me?" He looked up at Brewer. "You're welcome to her, Brewer," he said bitterly. "If she would go back on one man so easily, she'll do the same by another."

"You can't talk that way!" Brewer flared. "If I was wearing a gun—"

"What then?" Rod said. "If you like, I'll take mine off!"

"I'm not a cheap brawler," Brewer said. "You'd better go now. I think you've made Miss Day unhappy enough for the day."

For an instant Rod's eyes flashed bitterly from one to the other. Then, without further hesitation, he wheeled and walked out. As he started for his horse, he saw Jed Blue walking swiftly toward him. Without waiting for a word, he knew what was happening. He turned and loosening his guns, started toward Jed.

Blue hesitated. "Son," he said, "Dally Hart's up there. He says he'll shoot on sight."

"All right!" Rod said viciously. "I'm in the mood for it! If he wants trouble, he picked the right time. I'm sick of being pushed around. If I'm to have the name of a killer, I might as well earn it."

"Watch yourself, son!" Blue was grave. "There may be more than one. I'll cover you, but keep your eyes open!"

Rod Morgan turned and started up the street. His hat was low over his eyes, and he walked fast, his spurs jingling with his rapid strides. Inside he was boiling, but he knew he must steady down, for Dally Hart was a dangerous man, more dangerous than Reuben had been. If he shot, he must shoot to kill.

Suddenly he hated everything around him. The dislike and hatred around him had grown, and underneath was that intangible someone, that person or persons who guided the feeling against him, who started the stories, who colored them, and that person would be the one who had killed Tolbert and Weisl.

That person might be the one who knew where the gold was buried. But who could know? And how could he know?

At that instant, Rod Morgan saw Dally Hart.

The gunman had been standing behind a horse, and now he stepped into the open with his back to the sun, putting the full glare of it in Rod Morgan's eyes.

They were over a hundred yards apart, but Rod was walking swiftly. Sights and sounds were suddenly wiped from his world, and all he could see was that slim, tall figure with the high-crowned hat standing wide-legged in the middle of the street.

VAGUELY he knew that men had come out to the boardwalks before the buildings, vaguely he knew they were silent, waiting. Dust arose in little puffs as he walked, and he could feel the heat of the sun in his face. His body felt strangely light, but as he walked, each foot seemed to fall hard to the ground under him. His arms were swinging easily by his sides, and his eyes were on the claw-fingered hands of Dally Hart as they hung above his guns.

He was going to kill this man. Suddenly all the hatred, the trouble, the confusion seemed to center in the slim man with the evil eyes and hatchet face who faced him.

He was sixty yards away, fifty yards, forty yards. Rod saw Hart's fingers spread, but he kept on walking. Thirty yards. There was a sud-

den scowl on Dally Hart's face, and his tongue touched his lips. Rod walked on, taking long, steady strides, his eyes riveted on those long fingers.

Twenty yards—eighteen—sixteen. Dally Hart's nerve broke, and his hand swept down for a gun. Rod saw the hand go down, incredibly fast, then it swept up in a smooth, unbroken movement and came level. It flowered with flame, and then his own gun bucked in his hand, and bucked again.

Dally Hart wavered, then steadied. Something was wrong with his face. His gun came up, he fired, and a blow struck Rod. He felt his legs grow weak under him, and he fired again. Hart's face seemed to turn dark, then crimson, and the gunman toppled into the dust.

From somewhere behind him a gun bellowed, and he heard, as from a great distance, Jed Blue's voice roaring, "That was one! Who will be the next nine to die?"

* * * * *

There was a rectangle of sunlight lying inside the cabin door, and outside Rod Morgan could see the green, waving grass of Buckskin Run. He could hear the distant muted sound of the stream boiling over the rocks as it gathered force for the charge down through the bottleneck.

Then it came to him that he was home, in his own cabin. He turned his head. Everything was as he had last seen it, except for one thing. There was another bed across the room. A bed carefully made up. The table was scrubbed clean, the room was freshly swept. He thought about that, wondering vaguely how long he had been here and who had brought him back.

Somehow in the midst of his wondering, he fell asleep. When he again opened his eyes, it was dark beyond the door, and a lamp glowed on the table. He could hear someone moving around, the movements soft. If he lay still, he would soon see who was here with him.

While he was waiting, he fell asleep again, and when he awoke once more, it was morning again, and the sunlight was shining through the door. Then he saw something else. Jed Blue was crouched near the window, well out of sight. The door was barred, and someone was moving around outside!

Rod started to lift himself. Then he heard a voice call out, "Halloo! Anybody to home?"

It was Josh Shipton. Blue made no reply. It was grotesque to see the big man crouching there in silence. What was he afraid of? What could Jed Blue possibly fear from Shipton? Yet it was only too obvious that Jed did not wish to be seen.

After awhile, Blue raised up and glanced out of the window. Taking a careful look around, he unbarred the door. Rod hastily closed his eyes, then stirred on the bed and simulated awakening. When he opened his eyes, the big, bearded man was standing over him.

"Come out of it, did you? Man, I thought you'd never get over it."

"What happened?"

"You killed Dally Hart, but he got two bullets into you. I was right busy for a few minutes and had to pack you out of town before I could patch you up. You lost a sight of blood, and the trip back here didn't help none, neither."

ROD said, "You were in it, too, weren't you? I heard you shoot."

"Uh-huh, that Block C coyote of a Bob Carr tried to shoot you in the back. I got him, then had to hold a gun on the rest of that rawhiding outfit while we rolled our tails out of town."

"How long have I been here?"

"A week or so. You were in a bad way."

"Any more trouble?"

"Some. Jake Sarran, that ramrod for the Block C, rode up here with a

dozen hands. Said you was to be out of here as soon as you could ride, and they wasn't warning you again."

"To hell with that! I'm sticking."

"Want a pardner? My offer still stands."

"Why not? We're cut from the same leather, I think."

"I ride for the brand," Blue said. "You can count on that. We can make this ranch something, and if those coyotes want to try us on for size, they can start any time."

Rod was silent. More than anything, he wanted to ask about Loma, but he was ashamed to. He waited, hoping Blue would say something, but he offered no information, so Rod sighed and tried not to think of her. Yet she was always in his mind. Was she married? What was happening?

Also he thought about the vanished wagons, the gold, and the strange actions of Jed Blue when Josh Shipton had been outside.

Why had Blue not wished to be seen by Shipton? What was he afraid of?

Despite his curiosity, Rod had no doubts about his new pardner. A man who would step into a fight not his own, protect a man's back, and then pack him out of town to safety and nurse him back to health was a man to ride the river with. That must have been a tense situation after he went down. Certainly, few men would have dared to challenge the power of the Block C. And from his memory of the horses he had seen, Rod knew the Childs outfit had been present in force.

Lying there through the long day, he tried to find an answer to the enmity of the Block C toward himself. So much hatred could not stem from his original fight with Carr, nor from the subsequent shooting of Reuben Hart. Reuben had been gunning for him, he knew. Behind it there was a cause, and he had the feeling that the trouble lay in a man he had never seen—Henry Childs himself.

Hour after hour he studied the situation in the canyon. Three men had died and had been buried, and three wagons had vanished, along with much gold and gear. He racked his brain for a solution to the problem, but it was not until the last day he was in bed that an idea occurred to him. It was an idea so fantastic that at first he could not believe it would be possible, yet as he thought it over, he began to consider it the only solution.

He was rapidly recovering, and when he could sit outside in the sun and walk a little on his bad leg, he could see many evidences of Jed Blue's work. Certainly the big man had not planned to be a partner who just came along for the ride.

A comfortable bench had been built around a giant tree not far from the house, and a new workbench stood inside the log barn. A parapet of stones had been built, the stones fastened together by some crude home-made mortar. This parapet faced the entrance to the canyon, and two loopholes had been left in it for firing purposes. However, it had been fashioned in such a way that both sides could be seen from the cabin, and while available for defense of the cabin, it could not be used as protection by any attacker.

A water barrel had been moved into the house and was kept full. Several beefs had been slaughtered and the meat jerked. It was hung up inside the house. Every precaution had been taken for a full-scale siege if it came to that.

On a shelf against the wall were several boxes of rifle and pistol ammunition that had not been there before. Obviously, Blue had been to town, so he must know what Loma had been doing.

VI

ON THE fourth day when Rod could be outside, he saddled the gray and, getting a steel hook from

the odds and ends of gear on the workbench, took an extra rope and rode toward the basin. Blue had left early, and Rod had not talked with him more than a few minutes. He supposed Jed had ridden toward town, but the bearded man had said nothing about his destination.

Rod was quite sure now that he knew what had become of the vanished wagons, and he meant to find out. Come what may, he was sure that within a few hours, he would know.

He also understood something else. Both Tolbert and Weisl had been killed in the canyon, one of them near the basin, the other after apparently arriving at a solution to the problem of the wagons. He would have to be careful, very, very careful.

* * * * *

Rod Morgan's sudden appearance at Em Shipton's boarding house had startled and upset Loma. Try as she might, she could not get his face out of her mind, nor the hurt expression in his eyes when Mark had told him.

She had been standing in the boarding house when she heard the shots and had turned toward the door in a sudden panic of fear that Rod might have been injured. But Mark Brewer had caught her arm.

"Better not go out there!" he'd warned. "You might get killed! It is always the innocent ones who are injured in these fights. Probably Morgan is killing someone else!"

He had drawn her to him and kissed her lightly before turning toward the door. She had learned two things in that instant. She did not like to be kissed by Mark Brewer, and he had lied. He *was* carrying a gun. He was carrying it in a shoulder holster for it pressed against her when she was in his arms.

It upset her. Why had he lied? Was he afraid of Rod? Or did he merely want to avoid trouble? Yet suddenly, she'd been worried and uncertain. There seemed to be something underhanded about that gun. She had heard, twice at least, that Mark Brewer never wore a gun. Apparently no one believed he did, and yet securely in that shoulder holster a gun waited.

The thought rankled in her mind as the days went by. She heard that Dally Hart had been killed in the fight and that Blue had killed Bob Carr. It was not until the third day after the fight that she learned that Rod Morgan had been wounded and might be dying; that Blue had packed him out of town.

She learned that and heard some other remarks that made her think. She had come down from her room at Em Shipton's for a drink and was returning when she heard voices. One of them mentioned Morgan's name and, automatically, she stopped. The voice was that of Jeff Cordell, whom she knew as a Block C rider and recalled as one of the four men who had faced Morgan on the day she'd arrived in Cordova.

"Got to hand it to him," Cordell was saying. "Morgan has plenty of nerve. And I've never seen a faster hand with a gun. Why, that day out there on the trail he'd have got me sure as shooting if I'd moved a hand. I'd lay a few odds he'd have killed three or maybe all of us."

"Speaking of fast hands," said another voice, "what about that there pardner of his? That Jed Blue?"

"He's good, all right. He took Bob Carr so fast Bob never knew what hit him. You know, that hombre puzzles me. Where'd he come from? Why did he tie in with Morgan? He claims he was here with Kit Carson, but I know the name of every hombre who ever rode with Kit, and none of them was named Blue."

Somebody laughed. "You always used the same name, Jeff? I doubt if Childs has a single rider who uses his real name. Hell, we've all had our ups and downs."

"What do you think will come of it, Jeff?" asked the other voice.

Cordell's voice was light when he answered. "Morgan will get killed. You can't beat Childs. If he don't want a man in the country, he don't stay. Jed Blue will get it, too."

"What's his idea? I can't figure it."

"Don't try. Don't even think about it. You're getting twice regular cowhand's wages, so just set tight and keep your trap shut. Childs knows why, and Brewer knows. I think the two of 'em are just land hungry myself."

LOMA had gone on to her room then and after a few minutes she undressed and got into bed, but not to sleep. What she had heard disturbed her. There *was* a plot against Rod Morgan, just as Rod had said. Childs did want him killed.

Why, Henry Childs was the wealthiest rancher around here! Both Brewer and Em Shipton spoke so highly of him. On the other hand, who had given her the first bad impressions of Rod? Mark Brewer and Em Shipton!

Loma Day decided suddenly that she must talk to Jed Blue. She recalled that he had defended Rod on the stage. Had he known him then? No, she was sure he had not, remembering his remarks at the time she had recognized Rod.

The next day she saw Henry Childs for the first time.

She was talking to Jeff Cordell at the time. She had talked to him several times, but after overhearing the conversation at Em Shipton's, she decided she must cultivate him and learn what he knew.

"Did you ever kill a man, Jeff? she asked.

He looked at her quickly. "Why, ma'am, I reckon I have. I reckon a good many men out here have killed others. Not many of us wants to, but when every man packs a shooting iron and some of them are on the prod, it comes to shooting sooner or later. Then, there's rustler and road agents like, and time comes a man has to shoot."

"How about that day on the trail, Jeff? The time Rod Morgan killed Reuben Hart?"

Jeff looked at her sharply. He knew enough of the gossip to know that Loma Day had come West to marry Rod Morgan. He also knew Mark Brewer was riding herd on the girl. He had his own opinion of Mark Brewer, and it was not flattering. Jeff Cordell was none too honest himself, and he had rustled cattle and stood a stage on its ear a few times, but he had a wholesome respect for a woman.

"Ma'am," he said, "there's those who would have my hide for saying this, but you asked me an honest question and you got an honest answer coming. If Rod Morgan had been a mite slower that day, he would have been dead himself. Reuben Hart was sent out there to kill him!"

"Sent?" she said quickly. "By whom?"

But Jeff Cordell had talked all he planned to. He was turning to leave when they saw the door open and a big man with white hair came into the room. He glanced at Jeff, then at her.

"Cordell, they need you at the ranch!" he said.

Jeff Cordell got up quickly. "Yes, sir. I was just leaving."

Loma looked at the big man quickly. She knew instinctively that this would be Henry Childs. He was not a bit as she had expected, but a big, kindly-looking man with white hair and gray eyes. His mouth was unusually small, and his lips thin, but he was a handsome man.

Cordell turned at the door. "Boss," he said, "I found out who that hombre was we seen the other day. His handle is Josh Shipton."

Loma's eyes were on Childs, and she was startled at the change in the man. His face stiffened, and his mouth opened. He seemed suddenly older, and then something else came into his

face, and she knew she was seeing the real man behind the front he put up. For in an instant Henry Childs's face became wholly cruel and evil.

"Jeff," he said, "tell Mark I want to see him."

Em Shipton bustled into the room. "Did I hear somebody mention Josh Shipton?" she demanded, looking from one to the other.

"Yes," Loma said. "It was Cordell. He said he saw him."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why, that no-account blatherskite! If I get my hands on him, I'll—"

She left the room, storming with rage.

Loma turned thoughtfully and went outside. Too many things were happening, there were too many tangled threads. Whatever else she did she must watch for Jed Blue. He had been to town, she knew, several times since the shooting of Dally Hart.

SHE saw him ride into town, and watched for him to leave. He would follow the trail around the corner of the hill, but if she went down the wash, she could cut him off and stop him. When he mounted his horse and turned toward the trail, she slipped away and ran down the wash. Panting and somewhat dishevelled, she arrived at the trail edge. She was none too soon.

She stepped into plain sight when she saw him coming and waited there until he arrived. He stopped a little way back, and she saw a gun in his hand.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes." She hurried toward him. "I must talk to you. Now!"

He hesitated. "All right. Let's go over here."

He rode into the bushes across the trail from the direction she had come, then swung down from his horse.

Quickly she told him all she had learned—even about Childs's shock at hearing about Josh Shipton, and Blue smiled grimly at that, and about Cordell's certainty that both Morgan and Blue would be killed.

"Jed, how is Rod?" she asked. "Oh, I wish I had it all to do over! I didn't understand it all! If only I had listened to you that day on the trail. Instead of to them."

"He's coming along, ma'am," Jed said, "but I'm afraid this trouble is all going to break out before we're ready for it. You say that when Childs heard about Shipton, he sent for Brewer? Well now, what do you know about that?"

"What's wrong?"

"Ma'am," Blue warned her, "you better keep clear of Mark Brewer. As long as you know so much, you'd better know this, too. Somebody has been doing Childs's killing for him. He wants Shipton dead, so if he sent for Brewer, that mealy-mouthed skunk is the one who's been doing the killing."

"Oh, no! You must be wrong!" Even as she said it, she remembered the gun. "Jed," she said quickly, "I do know this. When he told Rod that day that he didn't carry a gun, he lied. He wears one in a shoulder holster."

Blue's eyes brightened. "Say, ma'am, that's the best news you've given me so far. That little item may mean the saving of my life—or Rod's."

"Why should Mr. Childs want Josh Shipton killed?" Loma demanded.

Jed Blue hesitated. "Ma'am," he said, "that's the question behind this whole thing. Only two men know what happened here when that gold vanished in Buckskin Run. One of them was Henry Childs, the other one is Josh Shipton. But a third one has figured it out, and I'm the third." He grinned suddenly. "Ma'am, you go back and tell Brewer or Childs that you met a man on the road—don't describe me—who said for you to tell them that Tarran Kopp is back."

Loma walked back to the boarding house and went in. She was sitting in the dining room at the long table, drinking coffee alone when Mark

Brewer came in. Before she could stop him, he went to his room, but when he returned, dressed for the road, he sat down beside her.

"I hear you met Henry Childs today," he commented. "Quite a fellow, isn't he?"

"He's big," she agreed. Then she looked up, giving her face a puzzled expression. "Mark, who is Tarran Kopp?"

If she had expected reaction, she was not disappointed. He jumped as if he had been shot.

"Who?" Then he leaned over the table and grabbed her wrist so it hurt. "Where did you hear that name?"

"Don't! You're hurting me." She drew back her wrist as he released it. "Why, it was nothing. I was out walking today and met a man on the road, a big man on a black horse"—Blue's horse was a sorrell—"and he called to me and said to tell you and Henry Childs that Tarran Kopp was back."

"Back?" Mark Brewer leaped to his feet. He was beside himself with excitement and, she thought, anxiety. "What did he look like?"

"A big man, probably weighing more than two hundred pounds. As big as Mr. Childs, I expect. He had black hair."

"Kopp himself!" He paced the floor. She could hear him muttering, "This changes everything."

"Who is he? What is he?" She was puzzled.

"Oh, just an outlaw," he said impatiently. "He was active out here fifteen years ago. He's believed to be the one who robbed those wagons you hear so much about." He turned toward the door. "Listen, if Henry Childs comes in, you tell him what you told me, will you? And tell him I want to see him."

VII

BEFORE noon, Rod Morgan reached the basin. After lying among the rocks for twenty minutes while he studied the terrain carefully to make sure he was unobserved, he went down to the edge and, placing his rifle beside him, began to cast with the weighted hook. For two hours he worked, moving slowly around the basin, taking care to keep his rifle beside him.

He would throw the hook across the basin, then drag it back along the bottom. He was well into the third hour without finding anything but branches and moss when the hook snagged on something. Twice it slid off before it held, then hand over hand, he hauled up his catch.

He drew it near to the surface, then out. It was a wagon tire! That was it then. They had burned the wagons and dropped the tires into the basin. So what about the gold?

A shot rang out. He hit the dirt, rolled over swiftly, and brought up behind a boulder, rifle in hand. When he realized no shot had come near him, he waited. Then two more shots rapped out so swiftly they might have been fired only a breath apart.

Stones rattled, then one plopped into the basin,. falling from the cliff above. A moment later there was a terrific splash. Rod caught a fleeting glimpse of a man's body hurtling past him an instant before the splash.

An instant he waited. He saw the shadow of a man atop the cliff, a man who looked over. Then the body came to the surface, and sank again. The shadow vanished.

Kicking off his boots, tired as he was, Morgan went into the water. Its icy chill wrenched a gasp from his throat, then he saw the body—only it was not a body but a man, still alive and fighting feebly.

Slipping an arm around the chest and under his arms, Morgan towed the wounded man ashore, blood staining the water red. It was a struggle to get the fellow to the bank, but Rod finally hauled him out. The man's eyelids fluttered feebly. It was

Josh Shipton, and one look at the wound in his left side and Rod knew he was dying.

His eyes opened, and his lips twisted into words. "Mark Brewer—drygulched me." Strength seemed to come back, and he waved an arm feebly toward the graves, as if trying to point. "Childs—gold—Childs—"

His voice fluttered, died away, and he lay still. Slowly Morgan got to his feet. Again he took a quick look around. Brewer had been sure of his work. He knew the man was hard hit, and the fall and the water would do the rest, as they would have, had Rod not fished him out.

Brewer had killed him. But what had Josh been trying to say? What did Childs have to do with the graves? Or had he been pointing at only one grave?

A horse's hoofs pounded on the sod, and he wheeled, gun in hand. It was Jed Blue.

"You all right?" Blue demanded anxiously. "I heard shots." Then he saw Shipton. "Ah? So Brewer got him, did he?"

"How did you know that?"

Briefly Blue explained about Loma and what she had overheard. Also about the gun Brewer carried in his shoulder holster.

"What made them so afraid of Shipton?" asked Rod. "He seemed harmless enough."

"They were afraid of what he knew. You see, Josh Shipton knew all three of the men buried there, and if he saw Henry Childs, he would smell a rat—and rat is right."

"What do you mean?"

"What Shipton meant when he waved at the graves," said Blue. "He was pointing at one of them. The grave of Harry Kidd."

"Well, I'll be blowed! Kidd—Childs! Then you mean Kidd didn't die?"

"That's right. Kidd murdered the other two, cached the gold, marked those graves so people would grow superstitious. Then he came back later, started his ranch, and helped spread the stories about the ghosts of Buckskin Run."

Rod said thoughtfully, "Smart at that."

"Uh-huh." Blue nodded. "Smart, except for one thing. He accused the wrong man of the murders. He helped spread the story around that the men were murdered by Tarran Kopp. Kopp killed thirty men, maybe, not counting Indians and Mexicans, but he never drygulched a man in his life and never killed a man to rob him. I know because I'm Tarran Kopp."

The thunder of racing hoofs sounded again, and both men turned. A shot rang out, and they saw a small black horse racing toward them on a dead run. The horse carried a girl who waved to them and then behind her. And behind came a tight group of horsemen, riding at top speed.

"It's Loma!" Rod yelled. "And the Block C riders!"

Dropping to one knee, he opened up his Winchester. A rider threw up his hands and dropped. From another pile of rocks Jed Blue was laying down his own fire. Then the horse was reined in, and Loma slid from its back into Rod's arms.

The black wheeled and raced away, and Loma dropped flat behind the rock with Rod. He lifted his rifle and fired again, but the attack was broken. Three men were down.

"Never figured they'd hole me up here!" Rod called to Jed. "You got plenty of ammunition?"

"Sure! Enough for that passel of rats! How about you?"

"The same. There's one behind that spruce!"

He fired, and the man yelled and staggered into the open, one hand holding his hip. Blue fired, and the man went down.

Lead spattered around them like hail, but their position was a natural defense, and the basin provided plenty

of water. With any reasonable expenditure of ammunition, they could hold out until hunger became too much for them. Rod turned suddenly to Loma.

"Can you fire a rifle?"

"Just give me a chance! My father showed me how when I was a little girl. I used to shoot a lot."

"All right, take this one. Keep your fire pretty well to the right. I'm going to circle around left and try to get in close."

She looked at him. "Oh, Rod, be careful! I don't want anything to happen to you now. I've been such a fool!"

"Forget it." He caught Blue's eye and motioned to show him what he intended doing. Blue nodded.

Rod slid back to get to lower ground. Then, crawling on his stomach, he wormed behind some brush. The two rifles would keep the Block C riders believing both men were still there. Rod crawled on, one six-shooter ready in his hand.

He struck a sandy trail leading upward, and that was what he wanted. It would take him to a position slightly overlooking and behind the Block C men.

There had been no more than ten in the attacking group, and three had gone down in that first mad charge. Another had gone down since, and unless he was much mistaken, the Block C boys had had enough, or nearly so. Their loyalty was purely money loyalty, and a dead man can't spend money.

He rounded a boulder and got to his feet. As he did, he heard a voice, then another. He froze in position. That first voice had been Mark Brewer's!

"Think we'll wipe 'em out, Henry?" Brewer was saying.

"Sure thing! Then we'll send the boys home and dig up that gold. It won't stay there a bit longer. Something always kept me from going after it, but now I'm going to have it out of there. Price has gone up, too. We'll have more money, Mark."

"No," Brewer said softly, "*I'll* have more money."

Rod Morgan could see them now through an aperture between the rock. He saw the surprised and puzzled look on Childs's face, then he saw it change to anger, then to horror. Mark Brewer was holding a gun on him.

"See how simple, Henry?" Brewer said softly. "I've been waiting for this, for the chance to kill you and have it all for my own. Your boys will think Morgan and Kopp did it."

CHILDS flashed a hand for his gun, but his holster was empty.

"Don't bother, Henry," Brewer said, sneeringly. "I lifted your six-shooter. Then I waited until your rifle was empty. Simple, isn't it? Now I kill you, let the boys finish off Morgan and Kopp, and *I* get the gold."

The two men faced each other across ten feet of green grass, cut off from view of the Block C riders by a rim of rock and trees.

Childs's small mouth tightened until it was scarcely visible, and his eyes were sullen and watchful.

"Well," he said, "I guess I got it coming. I guess I've always had it coming. I murdered for the gold and never got a penny's worth of good from it. Now, you'll murder me. Only we're going out together."

His hand flashed, and Mark Brewer's .45 roared. Childs swayed like a giant oak, but he held his feet. In the palm of his hand was a derringer. He fired once—twice!

Brewer's gun was roaring in a mad crescendo of sound, but the last bullets were kicking dirt from the ground. He plunged over and, as his eyes glazed, he must have heard Henry Childs muttering, "*I* had a sneak gun, too. See, Mark? Two can play at that game."

He shook his big head and tried to turn, putting out a hand for support that wasn't there. Then he fell,

sprawling on the grass. Rod hurried over to him.

Childs's eyes flickered. "That girl—sure is pretty." He stiffened, and his mouth strained out, then relaxed.

Rod stepped over the bodies and walked to a place where he could look down on the Block C riders.

"Drop your guns, boys! Lift a hand, and I'll cut down on the lot of you. Childs and Brewer just killed each other."

Jeff Cordell dropped his gun. "Damned if they didn't have it coming," he said.

He turned and started toward his horse. Without a word, the others dropped their guns and turned away. Rod watched them go.

Jed Blue, alias Tarran Kopp, or vice versa, was coming toward him, followed by Loma.

"Well, there it is," Kopp said drily. "Now there won't be any more ghosts in Buckskin Run."

"No, but there will be a home here—if Rod will still have me," Loma said.

Rod grinned. "Sure, I'll have you. The sooner the better. We'll use all that gold to buy cattle, then we'll take some of it and go to San Francisco for our honeymoon."

"But where *is* the gold?" Loma demanded. "Did you find it?"

"I know where it is. Don't you, Kopp?"

"Call me Jed. I'm going to stick to that name. It's got a better reputation. Yes, I think I know. It's buried in what was supposed to be the grave of Harry Kidd. Am I right?"

"Exactly. That's what I figured out, but Shipton said as much, too. When he pointed out that grave, he was telling me that Childs was Kidd, but also he said the gold was there. Anyway, it was the logical place."

"That partnership stand?" Blue demanded, grinning at them.

"It sure does!" Rod said. He felt happier than he had ever felt, knowing suddenly that all his dreams for Buckskin Run would come true. "We'll be pardners, and you can be godfather to all the Morgans, now that there are no more ghosts in Buckskin Run!"

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"Where's the gold, ox-puncher?"

The Rain God's Gold

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Booker had a case of outlaw trouble—but there was a cure!

ALL afternoon Dave Booker worked with his crew to load the big freight wagons and their trailers for the return trip to Freedom. By dark the job was done and the tarpaulins snugged down over boxes, bales and barrels.

Young Dave washed the dust and sweat from his big-muscled body, tugged on a new shirt and stepped out into the cool evening air. The single street of the wild frontier town of Tuva offered little in the way of entertainment, but he walked it hopefully, as always. Then he saw the girl he was looking for, and her father, and

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his heart swelled up and choked him and his tongue went thick and clumsy as it always did at sight of her.

She was a dainty blonde who affected him like the butt of a horse pistol in the pit of the stomach. Her name was Dora Dorrel and her father, Professor Dorrel, put up and sold the most popular line of patent medicines in the Southwest.

"Dave Booker, you're just the man I'm looking for!" Professor Dorrel exclaimed. "I want you to do something for me."

"Sure," Dave said, not hearing. His eyes were drinking in the girl's fresh beauty. If only he could talk to her instead of staring dumbly!

Professor Dorrel rattled on. He said that he and his daughter had driven north to Tuva for a special purpose. He explained it at great length. After four blocks Dave Booker awoke to the fact that the professor was asking him something.

"Will you do it, Dave?"

"Why—uh—sure," Booker said. "What?"

Dora burst into a laugh that was purest melody.

"I don't believe you heard a single word Father said!" she chided him.

"Uh—" Dave began, only to flounder into complete silence.

"I left my prize at the trading post below Tuva," Professor Dorrel said, smiling to himself in the bluish light of the stars overhead. "The keg is too heavy for my light buckboard springs. If you will bring the rain god's gold with you to Freedom, it will be appreciated."

"Gold?" Dave queried, surprised.

"That's my name for it," the professor answered drily. "It came from the sacred spring of the Hopi. It is of far more value to the human race than yellow metal."

DAVE found his tongue. He glanced around at the figures on the dingy street—hard-faced, booted, and spurred men.

"We shouldn't mention that word here, Professor," Dave cautioned. "There are plenty of tough hombres in Tuva who would slit a man's throat for the real stuff."

The professor seemed annoyed. "Perhaps," he admitted. "They would have the surprise of their lives if they opened my keg, though."

As they walked toward the trading post where the Dorrels were staying, the professor went into more details about why his rain god's gold was so valuable. There Dave left them. . . .

An ox-teamed freight outfit must start traveling early because it rests during the heat of the desert day. Before dawn, Dave had his three wagons and trailers down at the trading post. He always drove the lead wagon. Pancho, a youthful Mexican, handled the second. The third wagon and trailer which brought up the rear, was driven by old Tope Fines, a weazened, dried-up, tobacco-chewing veteran of desert freight outfits.

The professor's keg, five-gallon size, stood waiting before the closed post door. Tope and Pancho lifted the keg and put it over the end gate into the back of the lead wagon. Though fastened tightly, it smelled badly.

Dave moved up near the leaders to the spotted old ox affectionately called "Billykay."

"Let's get going," he said.

In the new morning, the freight outfit moved slowly southward. The sun was two hours high when the Dorrels came wheeling along in their buckboard. They turned out to pass the freight outfit. When they reached the lead wagon where Dave strode along beside Billykay, shoulders back, head high, the professor called,

"We'll see you in town! I'll be waiting for the rain god's gold because I want to get right to work on it. It is an important discovery."

Dave could not believe the smelly contents of the keg were of much value to any one, but if the Dorrels wanted it, he would deliver.

"There is only one other place where the stuff has been found in the United States," Dora explained to him. "That's in New Mexico. But it isn't in sufficient quantity there for Father's purpose."

The professor once more impressed on Dave that the keg contents were important.

"After I get samples to the laboratories back East, likely we'll have more orders than your freight outfit can haul to Freedom."

The Dorrels drove on. They would be home in half the time that the ox teams could traverse the distance to Freedom. Yet, slow as the ox teams were, they also were the only economical means of carrying freight across the desert between Tuva and the railroad town. That was why Dave had gone into the business. Rates were not only high, but he received all the hauling.

Shortly after noon, the outfit came to the first water hole stop south of Tuva. The oxen were unhooked, watered, and allowed to rest in what meager shade the few cottonwoods provided from the broiling sun.

After eating a mid-day meal with Tope and Pancho, Dave rested. Then he climbed a small ridge west of the water hole. There he flung himself down. A little later something on the ridge a quarter of a mile to the north drew his attention.

It was the head and shoulders of an Indian against the skyline. Dave frowned. In another half-minute, three riders came into view, advancing up the other side of the ridge.

The Indian had not meant much because tribesmen were always straying into the freighter's camp, seeking a bite to eat. But seldom did white men come near.

Scrutinizing the horsemen, Dave observed that their attention was wholly on the water hole. They did not come on, but did a peculiar thing. They retired from the ridge cautiously.

Getting to his feet, Dave retreated to the wagons. There he ordered his men to hitch the oxen.

"Span up!" echoed old Tope.

HE CAME up from the ground behind an ox. Pancho likewise appeared, his white teeth showing bright against his olive skin.

The two helpers walked out with short poles in their hands, instruments of their trade. Yet prodding was seldom needed with these oxen. The huge bovines seemed to understand human language. The beasts lumbered to their feet and trudged docilely over to the wagons assigned to them.

As soon as they were hooked up, Dave mounted the near wheel of his wagon to look down the line, waiting for the others to get ready. He hesitated as he received their signals.

Beyond the trees at the water hole, a man was coming on at a jog trot. He looked like a Hopi, in denim overalls and a red cotton shirt. He wore moccasins, and had a faded blue bandanna wrapped around his head.

Dropping off the wheel, Dave walked down the line of wagons. Old Tope turned, for he also had seen the approaching Indian.

"We gonna feed that pesky redskin?" he asked.

Dave did not reply as the Indian came up and faced him.

"You boss man?" the Indian asked in a husky tone.

"That's right," Dave said.

"I've come for the gold. Rain god's gold. You give it back. No trouble."

Old Tope muttered under his breath. Dave took out the makin's while he examined the Indian at great length. There was something wrong here. Yet the man looked enough like a dark-skinned Hopi to be one. His bandanna was tied around his head in the usual Hopi style, but this handkerchief, wrapped wide, was broad enough to conceal hair cut like a white man's rather than being bobbed short all the way around.

"No much time fool around." the

Indian declared threateningly, black eyes studying Dave. "Braves wait. Tall white man rob sacred spring. Come for rain god's gold. No get, kill white man. Now."

"You from Molla pueblo?" Dave asked, curious.

Molla was the Hopi pueblo village within five miles of Tuva. Dave knew most of the Indians living there, but he could not place this one at all.

"Me kiva chief. Come for gold. You help steal maybe?"

"I thought Tewa was chief there," Dave drawled, as he lit a quirly.

Now he was beginning to understand what was wrong with this Indian. No Hopi would pant for breath, even after running several times as far as this one had run from the second ridge.

"You no give back gold? Then I go and bring back hundred braves."

"We ain't got any gold," Dave told him. "Somebody's been telling you wrong. Savvy?"

"Me savvy you better hand over rain god's gold quick."

Neither Dave nor his men were armed, their weapons being in the wagons. This threatener carried a seven-inch knife in a scabbard on his right hip. That did not mean much. Dave doubted if he would fight. He suddenly doubted if he was even an Indian.

As Dave continued to scrutinize the alleged Indian suspiciously, he saw a peculiar stain spreading from beneath the bandanna around the man's head. A faint line of white showed at the edge of the cloth, and sweat was beginning to run brown stain on the man's face.

"So you're an Injun, huh?" Dave laughed abruptly.

He sprang so quickly that the man could not evade him. Striking hard with his body, Dave bowled him over on the ground. The man sprang free, but not before Dave had grabbed the bandanna. He jerked it clear off the head, revealing white skin and a haircut no Hopi ever wore.

"Danged white Injun!" Old Tope shouted. "Well, blast me down in the sand!"

The pseudo-Indian jerked his hunting knife from the scabbard. Seizing the man's arm as the blade curved toward him, Dave threw the chunky fellow several feet to the right. The knife clattered to the gravel. The supposed Indian leaped to his feet and broke into a twisting run past the water hole.

WHILE all three freighters stood there watching, he disappeared, still running as though he feared one of them would get a rifle from the wagons and open fire.

"What do you know!" Tope exclaimed, scratching the graying side of his thatch.

"He wasn't alone, and I don't figure the play," Dave said. He told them what he had seen from the ridge.

"That keg of stinking stuff is gonna get us into trouble," Tope declared darkly. "Let's leave it behind. Chuck it off the wagon."

But that wouldn't do. Dave had promised the professor he would deliver the keg safely to Freedom. Walking to the lead wagon, he got his prodder.

Up beside Billykay, he called, "Bend your neck into that yoke!"

Chewing placidly, the big brute moved against the wooden yoke. The rest of the oxen stamped along behind him. The pulling chain went taut, and wagon wheels rolled slowly, protestingly, through the sand.

As Dave strode along, he watched constantly for the appearance of the four riders he had seen, believing they would come galloping to cause trouble as the result of the failure of the painted white man to put over his bluff. Dave could not understand, in spite of all the professor had explained about it, why the keg of stuff should be so valuable that men would try to take it away from him. He could only theo-

rize that some of the characters hanging around Tuva had overheard the professor mention gold, maybe had seen the keg loaded on the freight wagon.

The afternoon wore on toward night and no riders appeared. Dusk found the wagons still several miles from the river they must cross.

As usual, Dave kept on traveling after nightfall. The oxen had been over this trail so often they knew that no pasturage would be encountered on this side of the river. Nearing the water, they moved along faster.

Usually the freight outfit camped on the north side of the river. Tonight, however, deciding it best to cross over, Dave went on down the sloping trail to the edge of the water. There, he had to use his prodder to prevent the oxen from rushing in to slake their thirst.

Having guessed his intention when he did not halt on the old camp site, Pancho and Tope held up. Dave unfastened his oxen, watered them, and hooked up again. He went on across the shallow ford, and up the south shore. As he reached the top of the bank, Pancho was unhooking the wagon to water the oxen before coming on.

Dave halted and unyoked, letting his oxen drift to a thin strip of grass close by. Shortly, Pancho came in. Dave was gathering a pile of wood when Tope appeared and released his ox teams. None of them talked much until after eating supper a while later.

Sitting around the dying campfire, drinking coffee, Tope and Pancho put their surmises into words then.

"If they hit us tonight, they have got to come across the river," Dave declared. "That's why I came on. We'll watch the crossing."

Tope brought his Sharpes rifle from his wagon. Dave got his sixgun and cartridge belt, placing the weapon close by his head. All three men were tired, and they soon drifted off to sleep. Occasionally, however, Dave or Tope would awaken long enough to reconnoiter the river. Being light sleepers they expected the noise of hoofs in the water to awaken them at once.

It was not a sound from the river that brought Dave awake before dawn. He lay in his blanket without moving, listening to stealthy noises in the direction of the freight wagons strung out down the river rim. It was men moving quietly, trying clumsily not to make any sound at all.

Only Pancho breathed easily in his sleep. Dave, turning his head slightly, could tell by the stiff way old Tope lay that he was awake.

Reaching for his gun, Dave started to sit up.

"Hold it, sand slogger!" a grating voice said, close to him.

DAVE'S hand came back from the direction of his Colt. He could see two men with leveled guns standing a few feet below the bed ground. The noise from the wagons stopped almost entirely.

"Where's the gold, ox-puncher?" the man with the raspy voice went on. "You'll save yourself a heap of trouble if you come clean about it right off."

"You fellers are sure crazy if you think we have got any gold this trip," Dave said, and added drily, "or any other trip."

"You're looking for a little kicking around," was the reply.

"What gives you the idea we're carrying gold?" Dave asked. "What a funny trick you tried this afternoon, sending one of your number in, trying to make us believe he was an Injun."

The other man cursed feelingly. Reminder of that escapade seemed to set both bandits on edge. The belligerent one took a step toward Dave. Then the flare of Tope's Sharpes came blindingly, with a roar.

Neither of the pair was hit. Whirling to the left, they ran to the nearest wagon as Dave grabbed his sixgun. He fired again and again, though realizing

that the two were well behind cover.

Pulling on his boots, Dave rushed to the nearest wagon. Crouched low against the front wheel, he dimly saw a man's form rearing over him. He jumped, managing to prevent the leaping man from striking him with his full weight. Dave was only partly hit. The gun-barrel the man swung glanced off the side of his head.

Dave could see part of his face then. He was the one who had impersonated an Indian. Dave's knee came up so fast it dropped the skulker to the ground.

Dave heard the roar of Tope's Sharpes rifle again, followed by the veteran's harsh words of disappointment. The intruder was already scrambling fast through the darkness around the front end of the wagon, over the short stub tongue.

A man yelled. The sound of running men followed. In another minute horses galloped southward.

"You hurt bad?" Tope asked as Dave came to his feet.

"No." Dave's jaw still seemed to be serviceable. "Tope, they didn't come from across the river, after all."

"Maybe not. Maybe they went ten miles up the river to the other crossing. They had plenty of time. Maybe they wasn't them four you seen after all."

"They were," Dave assured him. "The one who tried to get me was the white Injun."

"Do tell!"

Dave turned away to examine the wagons. To his surprise he found the loads hardly touched. A couple of end gates were out, and that was all. Probably the bandits' presence had been discovered too soon for them to have got well started on the searching.

Amused now, Dave went to the end of his wagon. The professor's keg was where it had been placed in Tuva.

The oxen were driven in while the drivers ate a hurried breakfast. Then the hooking up was completed.

Dawn found the freight train a few miles from the river. When the heat of mid-day came, Dave halted on the road. A few bales of hay brought along for this stop were broken out, and the oxen were fed.

The men sought shade beneath the wagons until the heat broke just before sunset.

It was Pancho who discovered a thin spiral of dust working toward them from the northeast. Only riders moving fast could make so much dust. Dave buckled on his sixgun. Tope climbed into his wagon, pushing out a place between bales of wool, from which he could stand off attackers. Pancho burrowed into a trailer so that he could keep out of sight.

In a few minutes, five riders came up out of the bare land. Dave's chuckle brought Tope and Pancho out of their hiding places.

"It's Sheriff Lukas from Freedom," Dave identified the portly man in the lead.

The small posse drew rein. Tired men rested lazily in their saddles.

"What's happening, Sheriff?" Dave asked.

"Buster Yael and his boys held up an army paymaster fifty miles up the river to the east," the sheriff replied morosely. "For a week we been chasing them to hell and gone. Lost tracks, picked them up again, only to lose them some more. Figured now on having a look at who's hanging around Tuva."

THE army paymaster had lost twenty-five thousand dollars in gold. That made the holdup so hot that the sheriff had to keep after the outlaws until somebody found them. The army believed the holdup gang had gone back to an old mountain haunt southwest of Freedom. Soldiers were looking for them there.

"Wonder if it could have been Buster Yael and his gang who jumped us last night," Dave said musingly.

"What would Buster want to jump a slow freight outfit for?" the sheriff re-

plied. "What about this business last night?"

Dave first told of the coming of the white man painted and dressed like an Indian. Then he spoke of the raid on the camp at the river.

"Doggone!" the sheriff exclaimed. "That is a queer one. What about this rain god's gold?"

Between Tuva and the pueblo of Molla, Dave reminded him, was a spring sacred to the Indians. No stock would drink of the putrid stuff seeping out at the base of a ledge of rock. The liquid was brackish and covered with a film of oil. The mud was gummy and surprisingly greasy.

"Lots of Indians take their sick there to cure them," Dave explained. "They either put them in the scummy water or cover them with a plaster of mud."

"I've heard tell of it," the sheriff admitted. "Maybe the stinking stuff has got rheumatic-curing powers. Only I know there ain't no gold there."

"The Hopi call it the shrine of one of their rain gods. The professor filled a keg with the stuff and wants it hauled to town."

What made the posse laugh as the truth dawned on them, was the raiders' belief that they were after real gold.

"Wouldn't them tough hombres have been surprised if you'd let them smell the stuff?" the sheriff chortled.

"The professor sets quite a store by the keg, so I aim to get it to him," Dave said.

"No doubt his next batch of cough syrup will taste like rancid bear grease," the sheriff drawled. "Well, Dave, we better be heading back to the river."

The posse turned up the trail after the sheriff. Tope looked extremely thoughtful. He had listened carefully to Dave's story of the Indian spring.

"I wonder now," he said slowly, "if that spring would do my weak joints any good?"

Dave looked at him in surprise. "Can't you get dirty enough without going there to waller in that mud like a hog?"

After the rest period, the freight outfit went on to the regular stopping place on Dead Man Flat, where the grass was good. Not many miles off, the dark line of green timber came into being. Beyond it was Freedom and the railroad.

That night, the three of them took turns watching from concealment beside the trail. Dave and Tope were armed. Everything passed serenely. There was, Dave decided, little expectation now of more trouble from the four previous marauders.

At the mid-morning stop the last day out, Dave returned his sixgun and cartridge belt to the wagon box. The freighters were now inside the timber line. Dusk should find them in town unloading.

Feeling entirely at ease proved to be Dave Booker's undoing. He and his aids were resting under a tree at noon when from the timber came riders. The four undoubtedly had walked their mounts up close before plunging in fast with drawn guns.

Dave and his two helpers had no chance to get their weapons from the wagons. The four bandits surrounded them and dismounted. A burly, deeply tanned man strode over close to Dave.

"So you're Buster Yael, eh?" Dave asked, with a wry grin.

The outlaw chuckled. "I'm knowed every place, sand-logger," he boasted.

"You can have the rain god's gold if you insist," Dave told him uneasily.

"You telling me? For giving us a passel of trouble we're gonna burn your outfit, cow-herder."

MOTIONING to his men he ordered them to hook up oxen and bring the lead wagon back beside the center one. The rear outfit would then be moved up to the others.

"The rain god's gold ain't what you think," Dave put in quickly.

"No?" Yael turned dark eyes on him.

The outlaw standing next to Yael was the one who had tried the Indian stunt. He glowered at Dave while the other two members of the bunch went toward the oxen.

They did not have the prodders used to handle the bovines. Furthermore, Billykay did not like the smell of strangers. One outlaw picked up a rock to try beating the leaders around. When he slammed it against Billykay, the big ox surprisingly let out a bellow and swung his horns. The outlaw cursed as he leaped back, hand pulling at his holstered gun.

At his sharp cry, Yael and his companion turned to look. Which was their mistake.

Desperate, expecting his bovine friend to be shot, Dave jumped for Yael. He hit him hard, at the same time seizing the gun in the outlaw's hand.

Yael was thrown back. Dave straightened up with the captured gun leveled. Yael tripped, fell hard to the ground, striking his head against the ragged side of a large rock. He rolled onto his side and lay still.

The outlaw beside him yelled a warning as he leaped for the stunted jack-pines on the left.

Tope was in the way, so Dave did not take a shot. He turned slightly to throw bullets at the two outlaws farther off. That stopped them from trying to close in.

This gave Tope and Pancho an opportunity to dive for the wagons, and when they made it, Dave dashed into the timber.

Tope's Sharpes blasted the air. The explosions frightened the outlaws' horses. Half-broken, not quite trained yet, they lifted heads and went running off to the north.

Dave had been moving steadily in the timber, constantly seeking concealment.

The outlaws would have to make a desperate move quickly now. Their horses would get miles away, probably beyond recovery, unless they acted swiftly.

Through a distant opening in the timber Dave, low against the ground, saw a man get up from the earth. Another man walked to him. Both turned through the jack-pines. If Tope had shot one, then the other three left must be together over there. Of course, Buster Yael was unconscious at the camp.

Making a cautious half-circle, Dave Booker moved carefully to where he believed the three bandits to be. For a minute or so, he could detect nothing. Farther out to the west, the oxen began stirring around. Some were grazing.

Billykay ambled through the jack-pines seeking green grass. Dave moved on until he saw Billykay lift his head. A movement had attracted the ox's attention. Suspicious of what it might be, Dave slipped across the bed of loose needles to the right.

Down on hands and knees, he could peer under the lower branches of a pine. A wounded outlaw lay on the needles while one of his companions worked at a bullet wound in his left side. A bullet from a Sharpes rifle will tear a huge hole in a man. Since this man was still alive, Dave guessed that his wound was more or less from a glancing bullet.

The third outlaw should be around some place. He was. Eyes burning at Dave, he stepped into the clear from a clump of jack-pines.

Dave's gun snapped into firing position against his hip. But as he let the hammer down, he suddenly jerked the barrel upward. The body of Billykay flashed in between him and the outlaw. Both guns roared. But the big ox spoiled the outlaw's aim.

The bovine's right horn caught the outlaw, threw him aside. Amazed that the usually docile animal would charge, Dave watched the ox rush like an avalanche on into the jack-pines. There the wounded man

screamed as he flattened out on the ground. The standing one tried to get out of the way of the ox, failed, and was flung up against the brush and landed on his face, badly shaken. Billykay crashed on, tearing a hole through the brush.

ABRUPTLY Dave laughed. He moved the muzzle of his gun against the side of the bandit near him. Motioning, he followed the fellow through the opening in the jackpines to the other bandits. Still badly dazed, one of the outlaw pair climbed to his feet. Having no weapons, he helped his wounded partner to rise.

Dave marched them into the open and down the trail to the wagons. Tope looked at the wounded outlaw and frowned. Tope would have made a big wager that his bullet had knocked the man out of this world.

They tied one of the unharmed outlaws to the top of the load on Tope's trailer. The wounded one went onto the wool wagon.

"You can't do this to a wounded man!" he protested. Nevertheless, he was secured there.

Yael began stirring around and groaning. He was lifted up, permitted to walk around while the last of his four outlaw crew was secured to the top of the load on Dave's trailer. Then Yael was trussed up and tossed into the wagon, helpless.

Tope asked about the outlaw horses.

"They're miles from here by now," Dave replied. "They'll head into some ranch by tonight."

"Span up!" Tope yelled.

"Span up!" echoded Pancho excitedly.

They rounded up the oxen and yoked them in. As Dave came back to his wagon, Yael called to him.

"We can make a deal," he whined. "For turning us loose, I can tell you something that will make all three of you rich men."

"Save it," Dave retorted. "I ain't forgetting you were going to burn my wagons."

Up beside the placidly chewing Billykay, Dave affectionately slapped the big ox on the side of the head.

"You gets an extra feed tonight," Dave promised.

There was hardly any dust on the road through the forest. The afternoon slipped away steadily. Finally, the timber gave way to a rolling country of browse and burned rocks. An hour later, following a trail which showed signs of frequent travel, the town of Freedom came in sight.

Sheriff Lukas, accompanied by his men, galloped into view on the back trail. They came out of the north behind the freight wagons. Dave did not halt. The sheriff paused at Tope's trailer, then alongside the wagon. He did the same at Dave's trailer when he saw the prisoner there, then came on directly to Dave beside Billykay.

"Hey!" he shouted. "I don't know any of them galoots! When Tope told us back there, I was hoping you'd run onto Buster Yael's gang."

"Take a better look at what's riding my load."

Sheriff Lukas dropped back a few yards and looked at Yael lying partly sunken down between two bales of wool.

"Well, it *is* Buster!" he exclaimed, going stern of countenance. "You finally run across a man you couldn't whip, eh, Buster?"

"This is torture, Sheriff," Yael groaned in abject misery. "This being hauled by oxen is killing me!"

"Maybe it's good for you," suggested the sheriff.

"I'll make a deal, Sheriff. Stop this crazy fool driving them oxen and we'll palaver."

"Where's the gold?" the sheriff demanded.

Yael looked suddenly surprised, catching something peculiar in the sheriff's voice. It caused Yael's teeth to clamp shut. The sheriff would make no deal of any kind. . . .

Professor Dorrel's two-room medi-

cine factory stood some distance above the warehouse at the railroad depot. Dave did not halt until he arrived before it. The sheriff began to get the prisoners out of the wagons. This created a little excitement on the street, and men started closing around to look on.

The professor stepped out of his laboratory. His face lighted up with pleasure when he saw Dave.

Turning to the end gate of his wagon, Dave lifted out the upper section. Shoving some loose hides and an old tarpaulin aside, he located the keg. Noting it appeared to have shifted around some, he lifted it out.

As he balanced it on the bottom gate, he was surprised that a small keg could possibly be so heavy. Professor Dorrel came up quickly and shouldered it. The professor walked hurriedly to the entrance of the laboratory.

QUITE a few spectators collected about the prisoners. Sheriff Lukas was demanding the whereabouts of the army paymaster's gold. Despite the menacing growls of the crowd, the sullen outlaws would not open up.

"We don't know nothing about no robbery, Sheriff," Yael finally declared. He scowled darkly, yet his eyes lighted on Dave with a peculiar expression.

Right then Dave was remembering that the Army carried coin in oak kegs. Then he recalled suddenly that the keg he had lifted out of the wagon had not given off a bad odor. He turned around again, only to see Professor Dorrel running out of the factory—a changed professor.

Bareheaded, his long black coat flopping with his angry movements, he charged at Dave. His eyes were glowing with frustration. No one in Freedom had ever seen him mad before.

"Confound it!" Professor Dorrel cried at Dave. "I had containers ready to send half the keg contents back to Easton on the train tonight, using the other portion in my own remedies for the benefit of mankind. And now you—"

The professor choked to a stop, spluttering and fuming.

Dora came out of the laboratory as he finished speaking. She halted close to Dave.

"What's wrong, Professor?" Dave inquired, but he was looking at Dora for enlightenment.

" 'What's wrong?' he asks!" shrilled the professor. "You brought me the wrong keg. It's not the rain god's gold you brought me. It *is* gold!"

He lifted his hands, in which double eagles gleamed brightly in the dying sunlight.

Dave jumped toward the end of the wagon. He pulled the tarpaulin and hides aside, exposing two more oak kegs. One was smaller than the other. The small one had a greasy look, and an evil odor.

Grimly, Dave turned to the group of outlaws. He could hear the professor babbling away with the delight of a small boy.

"So you shifted the loot to my wagon during the scrap on the river, eh?" Dave said to Yael.

The outlaw leader's face looked more sullen than ever. He had known since the fight in the timber that this moment was inevitable.

"Yeah," he muttered. "That much gold is sure heavy. We divided it up between us. It still weighted our hosses down when he carried it on the saddles. We couldn't make much speed on the getaway."

The kegs had been carried along, Yael admitted to Sheriff Lukas, with the idea of using them to cache the loot somewhere in the desert sands. Because of the weight, the outlaws had been unable to get as far away as they desired. They had gone into Tuva with the idea of getting a pack mule, which they should have provided in the first place. There, one of the gang

overheard Professor Dorrel say something about gold.

Yael decided they might as well have that gold, too. They'd hoped to obtain it by cunning, so had tried the Indian trick. When that fell through, the majority of the gang was for attacking the freight outfit promptly. This would give the law a closer jump on them, however.

"I had a better idea," Yael said. "It was to overhaul the freight outfit, replace our gold in our kegs and, hiding it in one wagon, let this sandslogger take it close to town for us. Meantime, we'd lose our sign from the law, which we sure did." He glared at Sheriff Lukas. "You was fooled complete. We got clean away from you with our horses light and unloaded. We figured to overhaul the freight outfit close to town, recover our money, and tonight hop a train out of here for some other territory."

Yael ended doggedly, "And it would have worked plumb easy, if we hadn't had a piece of bad luck up there in the timber."

"Your piece of bad luck was in tackling the wrong man," Sheriff Lukas retorted. "These ox freighters got to be plenty hard to make a living in their game."

Professor Dorrel, once satisfied he had his precious keg, paused to listen. Now that he lifted the keg to his shoulder. His smile was happy and broad.

"Gentlemen," he said to them, "you prattle of metallic gold, for which men kill and die. Here is a gold far more valuable to the human race."

SHERIFF Lukas spoke up. "What the devil is that stuff, anyhow?"

"This substance is known as ichthyol," Professor Dorrel informed him. "From it, we obtain ammonium and sodium ichthyol sulphonate. It was the great Unna of Hamburg who first introduced its use in medicine. He obtained it from fossilized remains in the Tyrol. But I have found the same substance here. You people do not realize how fortunate we are. This ichthyol is the best possible cure for skin diseases and for rheumatism. That is why the Indians have been using the sacred spring of the Hopi for centuries."

Sheriff Lukas scratched one side of his jaw and continued to stare at the professor. "Put it in plain words," he suggested.

"Oh, to be sure." The professor paused again. "This oil, as some call it, comes from the ancient remains of fish and sea animals. It is chiefly a bituminous material. —But I must get to work, if you'll pardon me."

The professor, despite his age and the weight of the keg, walked hurriedly into his laboratory.

Sheriff Lukas detailed men to remove the other keg from the wagon. Two others hastened inside the building for the first keg opened by Professor Dorrel. When this had been accomplished, the jubilant sheriff departed with his prisoners.

As the crowd dispersed, Dora turned to Dave Booker.

"Dave?" she said.

"Yes?"

He no longer felt embarrassed before this most beautiful of all girls to him. He took her hand as she turned rosy.

"I was thinking," she murmured, "Father will be lost for awhile with the ichthyol. Supper will be late. I was thinking that you would have plenty of time to unload and put your oxen away. Will you eat with us tonight?"

"It would sure make me mighty happy," he declared. "I'll hurry now, and see you after I get Billykay his extra feed."

He tipped his hat with a flourish, eyes bright. He was walking on air. He did not see Tope grin knowingly at Pancho, nor would he have cared.

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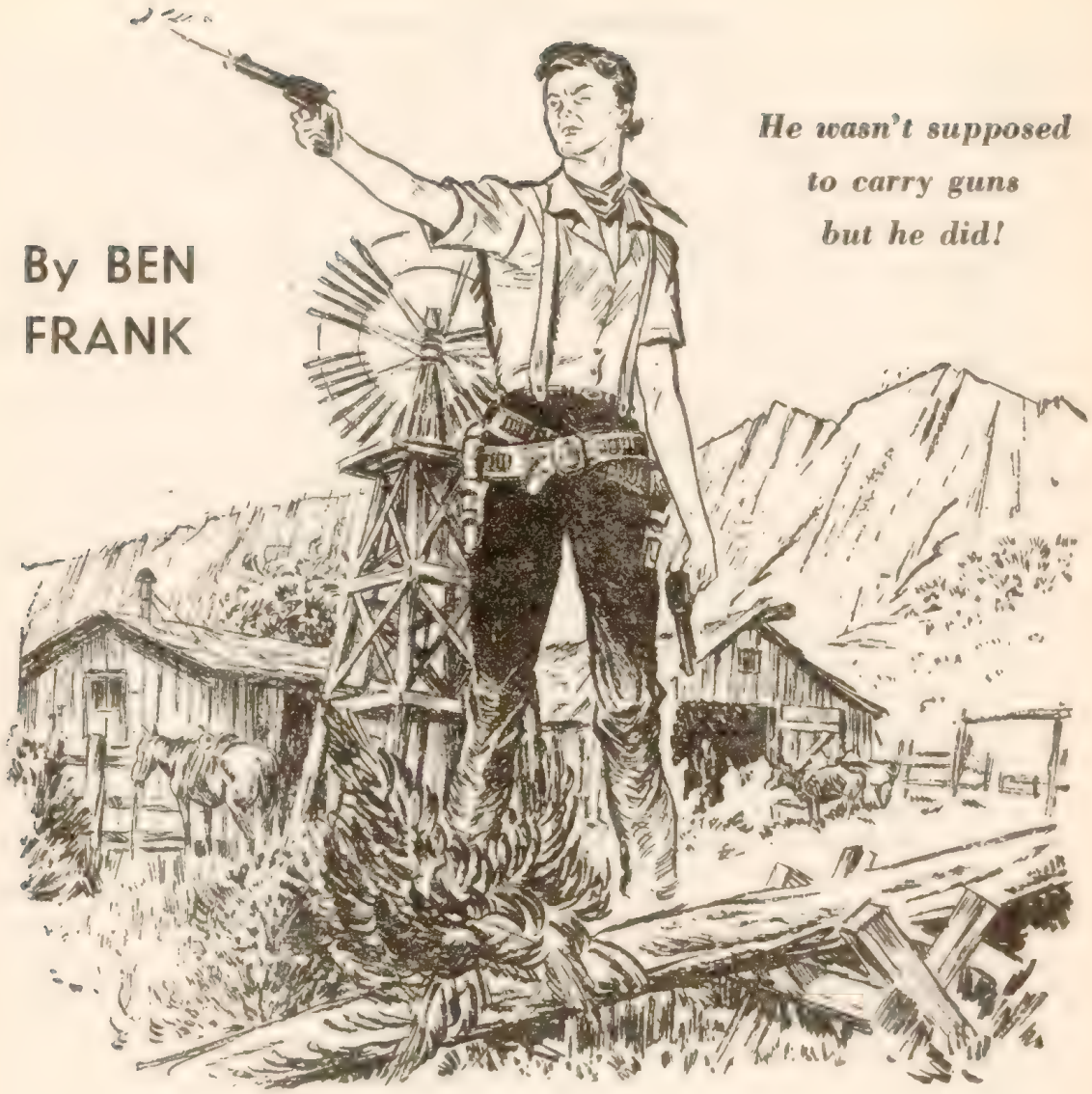

He wasn't supposed to carry guns but he did!

By BEN FRANK

COLTS *for a* KID

EDDIE TAYLOR wasn't a big kid, but the hate in him right now made up for what he lacked in size. He had a Colt in each hand. There wasn't much breeze, so the smoke from them hung in the gully back of Ancil Seymore's barn like a thin blue fog.

"There!" he said when the hammers clicked on empty shells. "I reckon, Pete Biglow, that pays you off for what you done to my dad!"

Pete Biglow was not there. But a piece of paper, the size of a man's head, pinned to the clay bank, represented the owlhooter, and there were some holes in that paper.

The freckle-faced kid blew the

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smoke out of his dad's twin Colts and reloaded them. That emptied the gunbelt. There would be no more practicing with those guns after this ammunition was gone until he got more, but his dad always had said that a man should keep his guns loaded full. And anything Dad had said was Gospel. Big Bill Taylor had been the greatest man who ever lived.

"Eddie! Hey, Eddie!"

That was Ancil Seymore's voice. In the kid's thin face was bitterness as he shoved the guns into their worn holsters.

"Coming!" he called back sullenly.

He was in for it now. Ancil Seymore didn't like guns. They were for lawmen, he said, not for kids. He made it hard for Eddie to get shells for these old sixguns, and without shells Eddie couldn't hope to get to be a good enough gunman to kill Pete Biglow, the big, blocky bushwhacker who had shot Bill Taylor two years ago when Eddie had been twelve.

When Eddie went around the corner of the barn, he saw that the bay team was hooked up to the light covered wagon. And Ancil Seymore was beside it.

Seymore was not a big man, but he had steady gray eyes that were sometimes hard to look into. This was one of the times.

"I asked you to stop this shooting, Son," he said.

Eddie's face tightened. He didn't like this stepdad. He had made up his mind he would never like him. Ancil didn't understand how he felt about his dad. He couldn't. Ancil wasn't the hating kind.

THE kid dug his toes into the hot dust and kept his lips buttoned tight.

"Son," Seymore went on, "your mother needs some things from town. Since I've got to go to that political meeting, I thought you might as well drive the wagon in and bring back a load of stuff."

"Yes, sir," Eddie said.

He never called Ancil Seymore "Dad." He resented having Seymore call him "Son." He turned toward the house, but Seymore's voice stopped him.

"Son, I want you to forget this crazy notion of killing Pete Biglow. It's the law's business to take care of him. Take them guns to the house and leave 'em there!"

This mild-mannered man never carried a gun. But big Bill Taylor had always packed two guns, even before he had become a deputy. He had lived by the sixgun and had died riding guard on the Bush City stage, taking Pete Biglow's bushwhacking bullet.

Biglow had worked for Old Man Tinsley on the Circle T, the biggest spread in Buffalo County. Some said that old Tinsley had hired Biglow for his guns, because Tinsley hated nesters and small ranchers, and they hated him. Anyway, Biglow hadn't been able to resist the Dobbin Mine's pay-roll on the stage. The driver hadn't died, so everyone knew that Pete Biglow had shot Bill Taylor. What had become of Pete, nobody knew. But Eddie meant to find him some day.

Now he faced his stepdad.

"They're my guns," he said defiantly.

Suddenly all the mildness was gone from Ancil Seymore's voice.

"The days when every man packed his own law in his holsters are gone," he said. "Remember that! Don't let me see you with them guns again!" He strode into the barn.

Eddie's eyes stung, yet he had a certain respect for this quiet-spoken man. His stepdad was a man who commanded respect. The nesters and small ranchers looked upon him as their leader, and the big ranchers hated him for this, and Eddie knew that his mother both respected and loved Ancil Seymore. Still Eddie also knew that he wouldn't dare carry his

dad's sixguns openly after this.

Eddie slipped off the guns and belt and buried them under the loose hay in the bottom of the covered wagon. Now he would have the guns handy, as his dad had said a man should.

His mother was fixing something for him and Seymore to eat when he went into the kitchen.

"Your dad and I have been talking about you, Eddie," she said. "This idea you have of killing Pete Biglow is all wrong. Hate is a terrible thing, Son."

"Two years ago you wouldn't have talked like that," he interrupted angrily. His mother's face paled, and his voice broke. "I'm sorry, Mom."

He went into the other room. So his stepdad had even turned his mom against him. Not having your dad alive and having your mom married to a man who kept pushing you around was hard. But his dad had always told him to keep his chin up.

He heard Ancil Seymore step into the kitchen.

"Ancil," Eddie's mom said, "I'm worried about Eddie coming back alone tomorrow. With this trouble that the big ranchers are stirring up."

"Forget it," Seymore said. "We're in the right. The law's on our side. The ranchers may do a lot of bluffing, but no more'n that. I wouldn't let him come back alone if there was any danger."

Eddie heard his mom kiss Seymore good-by. It made his blood boil. He didn't guess he'd ever get used to somebody taking big Bill Taylor's place.

His stepdad called to him then, and they all went out to the covered wagon. The canvas was up all around, and the shade inside looked cool.

Eddie's mom kissed him good-by, and he climbed up on the spring seat and gathered up the lines. His stepdad swung into the saddle on his black riding horse.

Seymore would be at the meeting several days. There was something in the air about the rights of the small cattlemen, and the governor was going to be there.

EDDIE slapped the lines against the bays' broad backs, and the wagon creaked into the dusty, rutted trail. He hoped Seymore would ride ahead so he could dig out the old guns and buckle them on.

At noon, they stopped and ate in the wagon. Ahead a few miles was Lester's and Clayborne's small ranch and Crazy Indian Creek. Eddie could almost feel that cool creek water swishing around his bare toes.

They started on. When they came to a rise where they could see the creek, Seymore said,

"Guess I'll go ahead. Lester and Clayborne are going along with us."

But just as he spoke, a shot rapped out on the quiet air. Seymore looked startled. "Wonder who's doing that?"

He rode ahead, and the bays, smelling the water now, swung into a trot. Then, above the rattle of the wagon, Eddie heard a volley of shots.

Something slapped against the sideboard and went right on through. A bullet! A couple of holes appeared in the canvas wagon top. The kid felt his heart bounce up into his throat. He and his stepdad were being ambushed!

Then he saw the bushwhackers, six of them, coming up from behind the creek bank, shooting and yelling like a pack of demons.

Seymore came back, riding low. When he slid from saddle, he had a knife in his hand. The blade flashed as he cut the bays loose from their harness.

"Get on and ride for your life!" he yelled up to Eddie.

The kid leaped down from his seat. His bare feet stung when they slapped into the hot dust.

The scared bays skittered around in crazy circles, making it impossible for Eddie to mount one of them. And all the time the bullets kept coming. They

made a sharp whistling sound, except when they hit the wagon.

Seymore got one of the bays backed up tight against the wagon and boosted Eddie onto the animal's back. As he dived into his own saddle, his hat flew off with a ragged hole in it.

Seymore booted the black into a dead run. Eddie had turned the bay to follow when he remembered his dad's sixguns hidden under the hay in the wagon. He couldn't leave those guns behind!

He turned back to the wagon. He saw then that the men weren't shooting at him but were after Seymore. Bullets were kicking up the dust in front of the flying black's pounding feet. Someone didn't intend for Ancil Seymore to attend that meeting in Bush City!

The kid slid from the bay and ran for the wagon. Before he got there, he heard his stepdad coming back. Ancil leaped down to the ground beside him.

"What's the matter, Son?" he panted. "They hit you?"

Before Eddie could answer, Ancil staggered back against a front wheel. A red spot appeared and widened on his shirt front. He sank down on the ground. The next moment the bushwhackers were right on top of them, their smoking guns leveled.

A thin-faced, youngish man with long black hair and a tight slit of a mouth bent over Ancil Seymore. Eddie's eyes bugged. He knew this man. Young Burl Tinsley, Old Man Tinsley's son! Eddie understood the setup perfectly now. The big ranchers and their hired gunmen were on the prod to stop the nesters and small cattlemen from cutting in on their rangeland.

They were starting in with the leader of the opposition, Ancil Seymore. And they would probably go after Lester and Clayborne. There would be others on their list. That meeting in Bush City would be a fizzle, and men like Seymore would be put out of the way for keeps.

"It's Seymore, all right," Burl Tinsley said, "and he'll live to stretch rope like all the rest of the damned rustlers."

Seymore wasn't a rustler, but they would hang him for one. They would claim they had caught him changing brands and had had to take the law into their own hands. Eddie knew about things like that—from his dad.

His stepdad was sitting up now, and he gave Eddie a little grin. He must have known that his life wasn't worth shucks, yet his gray eyes were steady and fearless.

"Who's the kid?" one of the riders asked.

"That's Bill Taylor's kid," young Tinsley answered. "His ma married Seymore a few months ago."

A BIG, blocky-shouldered man whose red hair bristled from under his hat came around the wagon. He grinned down at Eddie.

"So that's Bill Taylor's kid?" he said.

Eddie felt his blood run cold. His eyes moved over the big man, from the smoky blue eyes down past the stubbly chin to the low-hanging sixguns. One of those guns had killed big Bill Taylor. This man was Pete Biglow!

So the big killer was still working for the Tinsley outfit. Probably they had been hiding him all along. All the hate in Eddie Taylor's being seemed to rush up into his thin, freckled face. He could feel it!

He doubled his skinny, freckled fists and tied into the big man with all the strength his hate poured into his skinny arms.

Biglow didn't even stop laughing. He put his knee against Eddie's stomach and heaved. All the wind went out of the kid. It hurt something fierce.

He went over backward and landed up against a wagon wheel. A spray of sparks danced before his eyes, and

he felt sick.

Then he saw his stepdad get to his feet.

"You can't do that to my boy!" he said, and staggered toward Pete Biglow.

Eddie stared at his stepdad. He had been knocked down with a bullet and here he was, up and ready to tie into the bully who had kicked his stepson. Eddie felt a warm glow steal over him, only to be dashed away by a cold wave of fear for the little man.

The owlhooter drew his gun. The barrel glinted in the sunlight. It went up, swished down, and caught Ancil Seymore on the side of his head. It left an ugly, bleeding gash.

Seymore fell to his knees. He started to get up again, but Burl Tinsley shoved him back down.

"Take it easy, you brand-blotter!" he gritted.

They loaded Semore into the wagon, then shoved it down the hill to the ford that crossed Crazy Indian Creek. When they got to the creek, Eddie understood the reason for this. They must already have made a try for Lester and Clayborne and met with a warm reception. They likely had a couple of wounded men, and were going to haul them away in the wagon.

"Rep," young Tinsley said, to one of his riders, "go get some harness out of them rustlers' barns and see if you can catch them bays."

An oldster in the crew rode away on a shaggy pinto. From the south came a crackle of rifle fire. So there were more gunmen than these at the creek! Eddie reckoned the L C Ranch was under fire right now.

The men loaded their wounded into the wagon beside Seymore. One of them had been shot in the lungs. The other had his right arm in a bloody sling and looked sick.

Young Tinsley gave orders in a harsh voice, and the men hopped around like a bunch of trained monkeys. Even Pete Biglow minded.

Rep came back with the bays and harness. In a jiffy, the horses were hooked to the wagon, and the wagon was pulled across the creek to a shady spot.

"Rep," Tinsley said, "you stay here and guard Seymore and the kid. The rest of you come with me. If anybody gets hurt, Rep, I'll send him back here, and you can look after him."

The men followed Tinsley toward the ranch of Lester and Clayborne. Eddie knew those two ranchers were not rustlers. They were simply a couple of small cattlemen trying to get a corner of the range for their own use. He hoped they would be able to hold out against Tinsley and his hired killers.

Rep sat down with his back to a tree and a rifle across his knees. Smoke curled up from his corncob pipe. He was a mean-looking, bushy-headed old man with a scar on his left cheek.

The man with the injured arm called for water. Rep pointed toward a canteen.

"Go get some water, kid," he said to Eddie. "And dont' try to make a break. I'll have you covered." He patted the rifle.

Eddie took the canteen down to the creek, shoved it into the water and listened to the gurgle. He took a drink of the clear, cool water himself, then went back to the wagon. His stepdad was sitting up. His shirt was stiff with dried blood, but he gave Eddie a grin, and Eddie grinned back.

EDDIE held the canteen for the man with the bad arm. The fellow was little more than a kid himself, and he looked as if he'd had all the fight taken out of him. When the youngster had had his fill, Eddie gave the canteen to Seymore, then moved to the front of the wagon.

He glanced at Rep. The oldster was refilling his pipe, and the rifle slanted against the tree. Eddie moved his bare feet about in the hay. His big toe struck the buckle on the gunbelt, and

his heart pounded. Rep was lighting the pipe.

Eddie's hands pushed down into the hay. His fingers found the gun handles and wrapped about them. He twisted the Colts out of the holsters and straightened up. His hands were full of both guns and hay, but he didn't let the hay worry him. He pointed the guns at Rep.

"I got you covered!" he squeaked.

Rep's eyes widened, and one hand moved toward the rifle.

"Let that gun alone!" Eddie barked.

Something in the kid's eyes stopped Rep. His hand dropped away from the rifle.

"Throw that rifle in the crick," Eddie said. "Take hold at the end of the barrel."

"Look here, kid—" Rep began.

"You better do what he says," Ancil Seymore advised. "My boy can shoot the spots off a playing card, and he means business."

Coming from Ancil, that was music in Eddie's ears. He shot a glance at Seymore. His stepdad had a grin on his face and was moving up to the front of the wagon.

Rep took another look at those big Colts and heaved the rifle into the creek. The plash sounded good to Eddie.

Seymore picked up the lines.

"Better walk ahead of us, Rep," he said. "Wouldn't want you running for help."

Rep moved ahead of the team as Eddie kept him covered. It looked like a clean getaway, and they had his dad's guns to thank for it! What would Ancil have to say about this? Then he remembered that he had disobeyed his stepdad in bringing along the guns, and he didn't feel so good.

Something made him glance back, and his blood froze. Pete Biglow was coming down the creek bank, helping a man who had been shot through the shoulder. "Where you taking that wagon, Rep?" Biglow called.

Then he realized what was going on and let the wounded man sink to the ground.

"Hurry 'em up, Dad!" Eddie cried, the first time he had ever called Ancil Seymour "Dad." He liked the sound of it for some reason, so he added, "We got to make a run for it, Dad!"

Seymour whipped the bays to a gallop. Biglow didn't take time to flash a shot then. He ran to a horse, leaped into saddle and spurred after them.

For a couple of minutes, the stunted timber gave a little cover, then the wagon climbed out of the bottomland into the open. Pete Biglow came up out of the trees, and Eddie saw the gun in his hand, saw the puff of smoke, and ducked. He couldn't hear the whine of the bullet because of the rattling of the old wagon, but he had a feeling that the lead fanned by mighty close.

He leveled one of the Colts at the blocky man. A wheel went into a chuck hole, and Eddie went tumbling on his face in the hay, but he didn't lose the guns. The next minute he was up on his knees flashing a shot at Biglow. The bullet missed by a mile. Shooting from a jolting wagon at a man on a running horse was some different from putting lead through a paper target pinned to a clay bank.

They were tearing along the road that curved up over a cliff above the creek. Old-timers said that this was where a crazy Indian had jumped to his death on the rocks below. That was how the creek had got its name. Funny Eddie would remember that at a time like this.

Biglow's gun came up again, and another puff of smoke fanned out. Eddie shuddered. Biglow was trying for one of the bays! If one of them went down, they would plunge over the cliff. He tried to aim at the man, but the sights of the wobbling gun wouldn't line up. His finger tightened against the trigger. The smoke whipped out, but Pete Biglow kept coming, his gun blazing.

BIGLOW was gaining! Gaining fast. In no time at all, he would be up even with the wagon, and then he wouldn't miss. Eddie couldn't let him get that close. The kid's thin face tightened. He could feel the sweat popping out all over him. He wiped his right hand dry on his overalls and picked up the other gun. He didn't try to aim this time. He just pointed the long barrels at Biglow and fired away.

One of those shots did it. It seemed to lift Pete Biglow out of his saddle. He came down, clutching his left shoulder, and rolled over and over. He kept on rolling, the dust fogging up around him. He rolled right out of sight, screaming as he went plunging over the cliff.

Eddie's eyes couldn't seem to get away from that little cloud of dust that marked where the man had disapeared. He had hated Biglow from the ground up, but now he felt sick inside. The old Colt slipped from his fingers, and he sank down into the hay. He suddenly didn't want to be a gunman and a killer. He didn't want to hate any more. He just wanted to be a fourteen-year-old boy with marbles to play with instead of a sixgun.

The wagon stopped abruptly, and he sat up. They had met a group of riders. Men were all around the wagon, men with hard, determined faces and sixguns, rifles and shotguns. Eddie saw Sheriff Sid Cross. His dad had been this man's deputy. He saw old Doc Martin and two or three others he knew—all friends of the nesters and small cattlemen. Friends because the nesters and little ranchers were right with the law of the land.

"Ed Yarnell come to town with the report there was trouble out here!" Sheriff Sid yelled through the thick yellow dust. "What's going on?"

Ancil Seymore told him in a hurry. Old Doc took a look at Seymore's side and seemed to think the wound wasn't worth wasting whisky on to wash it out. He looked at the two men in the bottom of the wagon, shook his head over the man who had been shot through the lungs, and wound a fresh bandage around the youngster's bloody arm.

The posse went thundering on, and Eddie felt his heart swell. These men stood for law and order. That was what his stepdad so strongly believed in. Soon they would have the hired killers on the run. A man must be on the side of the law, not take it into his own hands. Eddie believed that now.

He climbed up onto the seat beside his stepdad. Seymore slapped the lines gently on the bays' sweaty backs. He drove carefully, for the sake of the injured men in the wagon. This was Ancil Seymore, always thoughtful of others, even of those who had set out to kill him.

Ancil drew a silver dollar from his pocket. The sun glinted on it as he put it into Eddie's skinny hand.

"To spend in town, Son," he said. "Maybe you'll want to buy some shells for your guns. Though I'd sort of hoped you'd buy that jackknife you saw the last time we was in town."

Eddie squeezed the dollar tight in his fist. He knew that his stepdad still didn't believe in guns, except in the hands of the proper authorities. This was simply Ancil Seymore's way of telling Eddie that he was mighty proud of him, yet letting him know he was a little disappointed in him because he had disobeyed. And that he still wanted to be Eddie's friend and was willing to meet him more than halfway.

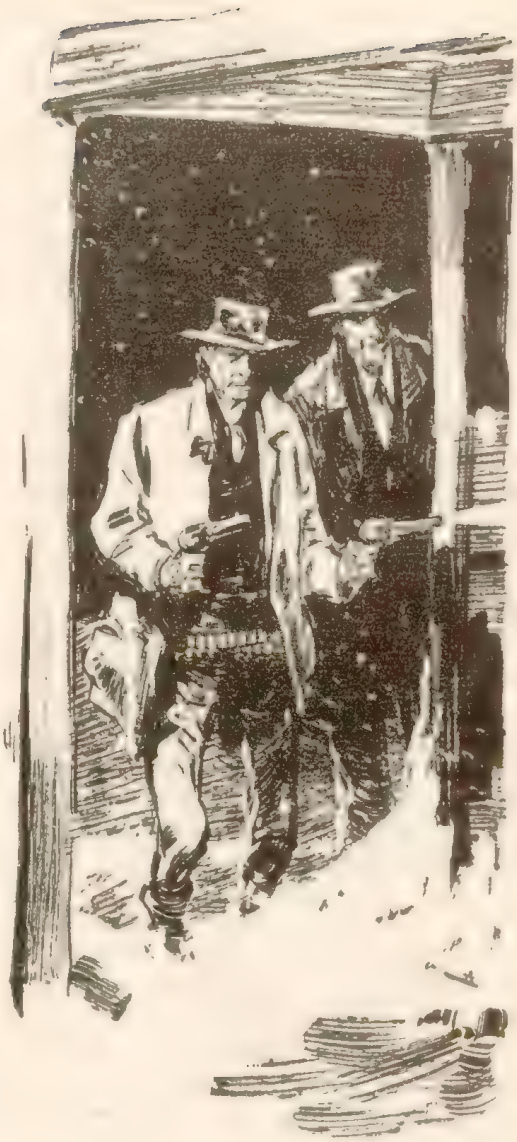
"Thanks—Dad," Eddie choked.

He reckoned that since big Bill Taylor was gone, he would let this man take his place. After all, a kid needs someone like Ancil Seymore to look up to and respect.

The dollar felt hot in his hand. He grinned up at Ancil and swallowed the lump in his throat. He was suddenly mighty proud to hear this man call him "Son."

"I reckon I'll get that knife," he said. ● ● ●

"Stand where you are, hombres, It's Black Jack Mundy talking!"



THE BLIZZARD *and* THE BANKER

A Novelet by

JOSEPH CHADWICK

It was an odd combination —banker and outlaw—that bucked a Dakota blizzard to feed a starving town!

I

THE first summer had been bad enough. The homesteaders had toiled mightily to get rid of the tenacious carpet of grass, straining to break the virgin sod. Then, when the planting was done, the drought had come and baked the earth so hard it cracked open. What crops came up died half-grown. But the winter, which later was to be called the Hard Winter, was even worse.

It struck the Dakota settlers like a vengeful enemy. It was a monstrous thing of howling wind, of blinding snow, and bitter cold. Men saw their children and womenfolk shiver and turn blue and grow gaunt from hunger. There was no saving what little precious livestock the farmers owned. And all this had to be endured. There was no way a man could fight back.

The first severe blizzard struck in mid-December, raged steadily for sixty hours, and then, when it let up, the temperature dropped to forty below zero. Two days later, the second blizzard came.

It kept up like that through Christ-

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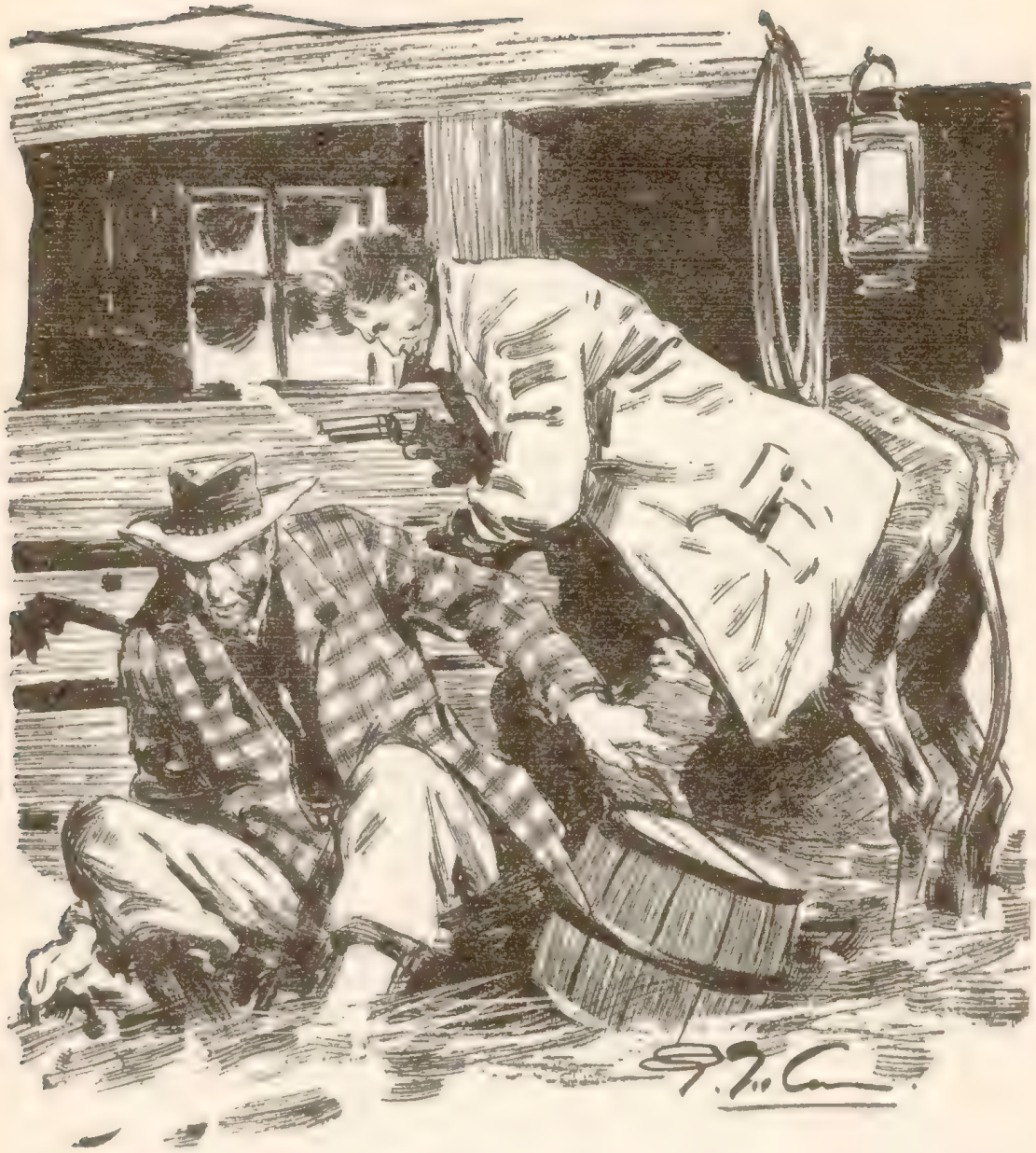


mas and on into the new year. Wind and snow and cold—and hunger. From the arrival of the first big snow, no trains got through to the town site, the shanty town of New Prospect.

The Big Blow came in early February and kept up for eight days. Three shanty houses in the town were blown down and all but carried away, and only heaven knew what happened out on the open prairies.

But when the blow let up, a lone rider made his way into town. He was young Purd Martin, who had homesteaded a claim seven miles to the west, and he had bad news.

"The Jessups," Purd said, with frozen lips. "The wind took the roof off their soddy. They're dead."

The ill tidings circulated, came to John Loring. There in his bunk after closing time, he knelt by his safe and went through his papers until he found one bearing the signature,

"Henry Jessup."

Loring closed and locked the safe, a small and ancient affair that four good men could have carried off, then slumped down in his desk chair. He stared dully at the paper for so long a time that darkness crept into the bank. At last, Loring sighed and fumbled in his pocket for a match. He lighted a candle on his desk, for there no longer was coal-oil for the lamps, and he held Henry Jessup's long-time note to the candle flame.

IT BURNED quickly, a small thing compared to the affairs of some men. It was a mere promise to pay a loan of two hundred dollars, at interest long overdue. But now that it would never be paid off, it was to John Loring a matter of great importance.

A big man, this John Loring. Forty-five years old, with a touch of gray at each temple, distinguished-looking as a banker should be. Scant rations had thinned him down, rid him of a burdensome paunch. He'd been a jovial sort before hard times came; now there was worry in his eyes, for they saw the ruin facing him.

He thought, if this keeps up, I'll have to close the bank's doors.

And he knew that then the polite hostility of the town, which had been building up through the winter, would turn into open hatred for him.

He sighed again, in resignation, then shivered. The fire in the pot-bellied stove had gone out; the bank was an ice-house. John Loring put on hat and coat, woolen muffler and gloves. He snuffed out the candle flame, left his bank, locking the door. The bank was a frame building, but more solidly constructed than most of New Prospect's structures.

Loring plodded through the snow and entered Wyland's Hotel and Saloon on the opposite side of the street. Half a dozen men were crowded around the stove that stood in the middle of the barroom. They wore their coats and hats even though the stove's sides glowed red. They looked around scowling as Loring's entrance let in a frigid blast. He slammed the door shut quickly enough, however, and so was not rebuked. He nodded to the men, saw the cold that was in the core of them—and their hunger.

He went to the bar. There was no one tending it, so he went behind it and poured himself a drink of brandy. He deposited a quarter in an almost empty till.

He said, on second thought, "Drinks on me, gentlemen."

One man muttered, "On an empty stomach?"

Another growled, "Maybe that banker's belly don't get empty."

It was Harry Jennett talking. He was a lanky man with a swarthy face and bitter eyes. He was one of the town's two merchants, but now he had no food to sell and no calls for any other merchandise. He put his back to the stove and eyed Loring in that sour way of his. Jennett hated easily, and was easy to hate.

"No call for such talk, Harry," John Loring said. "I've had nothing to eat since early this morning, and then it was only seed wheat put through a coffee grinder and cooked with water. I'll have the same fare for supper."

"Good enough for you, Banker!"

"I'm not complaining, Harry."

"No, damn you!" Jennett retorted. "You brought it on yourself. Last November I asked you for a five-thousand-dollar loan to stock my store and you turned me down. If I could have brought in that much supplies, people wouldn't be so hungry now!"

"You weren't a good risk, Harry," Loring said patiently. "I already hold too many of your short-time notes. You're a gambler at heart and you lost some of the money you got from my bank over the card table right here in this room. Besides, when you asked for that loan in November, you said nothing about stocking more food. You talked about stocking farm implements."

Jennett said, "That's a lie, Loring," but he spoke with no spirit, and the other men knew that the lie was his.

Stace Wyland, the gambler-saloonkeeper, came down from upstairs, a tall and handsome man wtih dark hair and metal-gray eyes. He had the pallor of an indoors man, dressed with care in the style of professional gamblers. He had meat on him, and he was vigorous.

The food situation had not bothered Stace Wyland much. Early in the winter, he had bought up, with cash and some of Harry Jennett's IOUs, at least half of Jennett's stock of food.

BANKER LORING eyed Wyland with grudging respect. The gambler had foreseen the hard winter. And he was a man who took chances. Wyland had set himself up in business because he, like John Loring and others, had believed that New Prospect would be the division headquarters of the new railroad.

That would have meant, had it become an actuality, that the railroad shops and many workmen would come to the town. Wyland had gambled and lost, for the railroad was passing New Prospect up, except for a station. But the man was sitting the winter out, knowing he would make a killing when construction work on the road would begin again in the spring.

Now he said brusquely, "If you two have something to settle, take it outside."

Loring said, "It's forgotten."

Harry Jennett said nothing at all. His gaze fell away from the banker, who came from behind the bar.

Loring sipped his brandy. It spread a false warmth through him.

He watched Stace Wyland feed more wood into the stove. That was something else the saloon owner had plenty of; he was burning lumber straight from Craley's yard, having bought it up months before. And lumber in a settlement on the all but treeless Dakota plains ran into money.

Wyland not only knew how to make money; he also knew how to spend it. Most people were keeping their fires going by burning hay.

Three other townsmen came in, joining the others around the stove.

The cold was discussed, the chances of another terrible blizzard, and finally, as always with hungry people, the men talked about food. They even tormented themselves by telling of their favorite dishes.

In the midst of their conversation, Bonnie Hanlon appeared, her high heels tapping as she came down the stairs. John Loring turned his head to watch her. Perhaps it was partly the brandy, but he suddenly forgot that he was cold and hungry. For a long time now, ever since she had come to New Prospect eight months ago, John Loring had found watching Bonnie Hanlon a pleasant pastime.

She was not young, compared to what men called young in a woman, but even in her middle thirties, Bonnie clung to the bloom of youth. She had cameo-perfect features, clear and steady gray eyes, full and seemingly inviting lips. She was thinner than she had been in the summer, but still her beauty of face and figure was undiminished.

The town had believed in the beginning, when Bonnie had come to deal faro in Wyland's place, that she was his woman. Loring had tried not to think of it, one way or another, but he had come to realize that Bonnie Hanlon was nobody's woman. Now she caught his eyes on her and gave him a smile that was somehow mocking.

She crossed to him. "Do bankers mind this cold, Mr. Loring?" she asked. "Or does money keep them warm?"

"Money can be a pretty useless thing sometimes, Bonnie."

"That, coming from a banker!" she exclaimed in mock surprise. "You know," she added, "I'd hate the cold and the snow a lot more, except for the fact that everyone—rich and poor,

banker and gambler and rancher—suffers the same way. Or don't you agree that they do, Mr. Loring?"

LORING smiled, not quite sure why she was bantering him. He said, "I'm beginning to think there's little difference between a banker and a gambler, Bonnie."

"But one is respectable."

"That's a matter of opinion," Loring said. He saw Stace Wyland watching him and the woman. Wyland was frowning as he puffed on a cigar. Loring added, "Besides, a banker is considered respectable only when his institution is solvent. With things as they are, who can tell when my gambling—and it is that—may clean me out?"

Bonnie's smile faded. "You don't mean, John—"

She got no farther. The door slammed open, and a gust of wind swirled powdery snow into the saloon.

Stace Wyland growled, "Damn it! Hurry up and close that door!"

Loring saw a sudden alertness come to the men around the stove. He noticed that Wyland grabbed the cigar from his mouth, and looked as though he wished he hadn't talked up.

And Bonnie was staring. She whispered, "It's Jack Mundy!"

Loring swung around then, eager to see the man who could shock so many people, just by opening a door and not even speaking. It was his first glimpse of the outlaw, Black Jack Mundy.

II

LORING felt disappointed, for Black Jack Mundy didn't make much of an appearance. A short, stocky young fellow with a shock of yellow hair dangling from under his broad-brimmed hat. He was fair-skinned and the cold had his face whipped red. His eyes were a babyblue.

The banker wondered vaguely why such a man should be called Black Jack. But there was something in Jack Mundy's manner that made Loring study him.

It was a jaunty manner, a reckless devil-may-care air. Jack ignored Stace Wyland's order to close the door. He came into the barroom, letting the door stand wide open. Wyland hurried to close it. The outlaw wore high-heeled boots mounted with Mexican spurs. He was wrapped in a coat cut from tarp canvas and lined with piecings from a woolen army blanket.

He unbuttoned his coat, patted the sixgun holstered at his thigh.

"There's a reward for me, gents," he said loudly, mockingly. "The railroad figures I held up one of its trains a couple of months back, and it'll pay a thousand dollars for me—dead or alive. But don't get any notions."

Still grinning, he backed to the bar.

"Been holed up in a sod hut out on Willow Creek," he went on. "Lonely as hell. Got sick of my own company, so I figured I'd ride in and paint this town red." He shot Stace Wyland a look. "I put my horse up in that barn of yours out back, Wyland. That'll be all right with you, I reckon, since I'll be spending money."

He took a ten-dollar gold piece from his pocket and put it on the bar. "Drinks on me, gents," he invited. "And for the lady, too."

Nobody moved.

"What's the trouble?" Jack demanded. "Ain't I good enough to drink with?"

Loring said, "It's not that, friend. Hungry men don't drink."

"Hungry? Why now, I've been living off the fat of the land."

"You'll go hungry here, friend."

Jack looked Loring up and down, and said, "Who says we're friends, mister? I don't know you."

"My name's John Loring. I'm the town's banker."

"The banker, eh? Maybe we should be friends. Maybe one day I'll pay your bank a friendly visit—Mr. Loring."

Loring gave him a thin smile. "Don't

try it, Jack," he said. "I always keep a loaded shotgun handy. And I could be pretty quick with it."

The door swung open again before Jack Mundy could reply to that, and the man who came staggering in carried, to everyone's amazement, a shotgun. He kicked the door shut and came but two steps forward. It was Jeb Watts, the carpenter, who was known as a good workman and a sober citizen. But now he looked wilder than Black Jack Mundy had ever looked. His cold-blued lips moved, but at first no words came.

Loring stepped over to him, asking, "What's wrong, Jeb?"

"My cow—stolen!" Watts finally gasped. "Some dirty son stole my cow, and now my baby's crying her heart out for milk!" He stared about, looking at each person in turn as though trying to find guilt on one face. "I swear I'll kill the man who did it!"

Loring felt suddenly sick in his thoughts. He knew what had happened; at least, he could guess the truth. Some famished man had crept into Watts' lean-to barn and taken the cow with the intention of butchering it for meat. Watts's six-month-old baby, whose mother has died giving it life, had not been considered by the thief. Jeb Watts's wildness was understandable.

"Who did it?" the carpenter yelled.

Loring said, "Nobody here, Jeb. Come along, I'll help you look. Maybe we can find the critter."

HE TOOK hold of the man's arm, turned him to the door, telling himself that he would get the shotgun away from the man as soon as possible.

Jack Mundy came over and said, "You mean to say folks here are that hard up?"

"It's worse than I can tell you," Loring replied.

He opened the door and pushed Jeb Watts out. Jack Mundy came after them, an odd look of concentration on his blunt face. The three of them went to Watts's small house at the north end of the street. It was unpainted, but well-built, and the mournful cry of the hungry baby came from within.

As they walked around back, Loring glanced through one of the partially ice-covered windows. The kitchen was lit by candles. Watts's twelve-year-old daughter was sitting by the stove, rocking the baby.

Jack Mundy, too, had looked. He said, "And all that grub at my soddy!"

There was nothing to see in Watts's little barn. There was hay piled high for the cow that was gone. The stall was certainly empty. Watts said he figured the cow had been taken shortly after dark, maybe an hour ago.

Jack Mundy prowled through the snow that had drifted about the barn and finally said, "Your cow went this way, mister—east."

In the darkness, Loring could barely see the marks in the powdery snow, but he felt sure that Black Jack Mundy knew what he was talking about. He said, "You wait with your children, Jeb. We'll bring your cow back."

Watts argued that he would go along and use his shotgun on the cow thief, but finally Loring made him listen to reason. Jack Mundy led the banker to the railroad tracks and east along them. The wind blew in gusts.

John Loring was chilled to the marrow of his bones. There was a sharp hunger ache in his belly. His strength wasn't good; he kept stumbling.

He asked finally, "How much farther, Jack?"

Jack Mundy replied, a laugh in his voice, "Not much. I see a fire ahead. And I hear that blamed cow bawling. You know, Loring, down in the Panhandle where I come from, there's more cow critters than a thousand hombres can count. It gives me a chuckle, out hunting one lonesome cow."

"Yeah," said Loring. "A funny chore for an outlaw."

"Ain't it, though? Quiet, now!"

The fire patched the darkness with a bright glow that revealed a shanty, an abandoned railroad tool shed, and a man feeding twisted hay into the flames. Another man held a rope, and the rope held the Watts cow.

Loring recognized the two men—Ike Payson and Dutch Schultz. They were a couple of ugly customers.

Jack Mundy drew his sixgun, then flung his laughing voice at the pair. "Stand where you are, hombres. Black Jack Mundy talking!"

The hardcase by the fire, Dutch Schultz, uttered a startled oath. Ike Payson grunted and let loose of the cow's rope. They grabbed for their guns.

Jack Mundy took his time. He let them get their sixguns out before he fired. He shot Dutch Schultz first, and the hardcase howled. He dropped his gun, grabbed at his left side with both hands, and went to his knees. The outlaw shot at Payson next, but missed. But the thief must have heard the whine of the slug. He dropped his weapon and flung his hands high.

"Don't kill me, Mundy!" he yelled.

Jack Mundy said, "Go get their guns, Banker."

Loring obeyed. He thrust the two sixguns into the pockets of his overcoat, then caught up the cow's lead rope. The critter was gentle enough but, needing to be milked, it kept bawling. Jack Mundy came up, not smiling now.

"You no-good sons, try to steal a baby's milk again," he said, "and I'll gut-shoot you, sure. Let's go, Loring."

DUTCH SCHULTZ was still on his knees, hands pressed to his left side. He had a matted black beard and was whimpering through it. Ike Payson said nothing—in words. But his beady eyes told John Loring that this wouldn't end here.

Banker, outlaw, and cow headed back along the roadbed. It was a long, cold mile to town. On the way, Loring threw the two captured sixguns into a snowdrift. At the edge of town, he gave Jack Mundy the lead rope.

"You return her, Jack," he said. "I've got to find some supper. Haven't eaten since early this morning. I'm weak in the knees."

"This whole town starving?"

"All but Stace Wyland, and maybe the two storekeepers."

"Kids like Watts's?"

"Must be fifty hungry kids here, Jack."

Jack Mundy swore softly. "Well, I'll get this cow critter back where it belongs. Then I'm going to drink up that ten-dollar gold piece I left on Wyland's bar. S'long, Banker."

He started toward the Watts house, but Loring stopped him by saying, "Watch yourself in town, Jack. I'd hate to see you end up like outlaws always end up. We've got no lawmen here in New Prospect, but a thousand-dollar reward offer might turn a lot of men into bounty hunters."

Jack laughed. "That's funny talk for a banker. Tell you what, Loring. I'll see you in the morning. I'll come to your bank. But don't go for your shotgun when I open the door."

"All right, Jack," Loring said.

The banker followed the telegraph poles up to the railroad station.

Bald little Herb Lane was telegrapher at New Prospect. As Loring passed the station, he heard Herb pounding his key. Loring was surprised, for with every blizzard the wire went dead and usually stayed dead for a week or more. Evidently repairs had been made quickly, after the Big Blow.

Loring turned into the station, curious to learn if there were news of a train getting through. Herb looked up and nodded. He was listening to the clattering instrument, writing down the message that was coming through.

"Train coming through, Herb?"

"Nope," the telegrapher said. "No such luck. They've got an engine and a snowplow embedded in solid ice just

west of Leeds. There's no chance of a train getting through until there's a big thaw." He rose and came to the stove, holding a message in his hand. "Shouldn't show this to anybody, I guess, but I don't like the looks of it. Something queer is going on between Stace Wyland and J. P. Fleming, the division superintendent."

Loring took the paper and held it to the lamp. There were just three words:

Place Your Bets

The message was addressed to Stace Wyland and was signed "Smith."

THE telegraph operator gave the banker an amused grin.

"A man running a bank should be able to figure that out, John," he said. "Of course, I can be wrong. But it looks to me as though Wyland and Fleming are in cahoots. Wyland's already got a big stake in this town. Like everybody, he figured New Prospect would be the railroad's division headquarters."

Loring broke in, "but it was a false report. The road's already built a mile beyond town. The shops and roundhouses are to be constructed thirty miles west, according to the last reports."

Lady Rustler

There was a young miss of Seattle,
A rustler she was, I must tattle—
But her praises were sung,
And she never was hung,
For she rustled men, and not cattle!

—Pecos Pete

Loring handed back the message and said, "What makes you think Fleming sent it, Herb?"

"That Smith signature don't fool me," Herb replied. "Just before the Big Blow Wyland sent a wire to J. P. Fleming at Leeds. I never knew him to telegraph anybody else. His message read, 'Time short. Urgent. I know how to place bets.' Now a reply comes, 'Place your bets.' It sure didn't come from a man named Smith. J. P. Fleming is trying to cover up."

"Some wager they've got on, maybe?"

"Some deal, I'd say."

"What kind of a deal, Herb?"

"Suppose the bigwigs changed their plans," Herb said. "The shops and roundhouse could still be built here. And Fleming might be the man who got the bigwigs to change their minds. Now, working with Stace Wyland, he may be getting ready to cut a melon."

Loring nodded and said, "I get it, Herb," and the two of them fell silent.

But the banker's mind was racing. The building of railroad shops at New Prospect would mean that several hundred jobs would be created and that a steady flow of money, in wages, would come to the town.

Business would boom. The nearby farmers, on the verge of ruin, would

have a close market for their crops. New Prospect, instead of dying, as had seemed a certainty, would take on a new lease of life. The business places would prosper, and new ones would open up. Loring's own bank would certainly flourish!

III

STACE WYLAND knew all that. And for some reason of his own, he was working with J. P. Fleming to keep secret the new decision to bring division headquarters to the town. As Herb Lane had said, a banker should be able to understand their game.

Wyland would now "place his bets." He would make investments. He would buy up town properties and he'd be able to buy them for a song, the way things were at the moment. When the new railroad plans became publicly known, the same properties would skyrocket in value. Wyland, with his secret partner, J. P. Fleming, would have made himself rich. The people who had sold out would be the losers.

"Herb, if we've guessed right, we can't let them get away with this," Loring said. "It's a blackleg scheme."

"If word leaks out," Herb said worriedly. I'll lose my job."

Loring nodded. "I'll think of some way to protect you, Herb," he assured the telegrapher. "I'll sleep on it tonight and by morning know what to do. Good night, Herb."

The town, under its burden of snow, looked different when John Loring left the station. The difference, of course, was in his own mind. The severe winter had convinced him that New Prospect had no future, that it was doomed to wither on the vine. But at last there was a ray of hope. And the town looked better to John Loring's banker's mind.

He had trained for his profession back East and he knew how prosperous a farming and industrial community could become. New Prospect had the farms, and if it got the railroad shops—yes, it looked different to John Loring tonight.

He suddenly realized that he had some love for the little place. He wanted to stay here and grow with the town and help it grow. But he didn't want to see the better part of it owned by Stace Wyland.

He reached Wyland's hotel-saloon, looked in through one of the frost-blurred windows. Black Jack Mundy was at the bar, drinking and talking to the men grouped around the stove, no doubt boasting of how he had recovered the Watts cow in a gun-fight with Ike Payson and Dutch Schultz.

Stace Wyland was behind the bar, puffing on a cigar. Bonnie Hanlon sat on a chair in a corner, huddled in her fur coat.

Loring turned away, crossed the street, climbed the ice-coated outside steps to the door of his living quarters.

Inside, he lighted a candle and started a fire in the stove. He rummaged around in the cupboard, found only a little flour and a few beans and some ground seed wheat. With these he cooked a scanty meal. But he was more concerned now with finding a way to stop Stace Wyland from placing his bets. It wouldn't be easy, even when the news got out that the railroad had changed its plans. Most of the townspeople would jump at any offer to sell out—dirt cheap.

No, it wouldn't be as easy as recovering a stolen cow!

When Loring opened his bank in the morning, he still did not know how to stop Stace Wyland. With Herb Lane's job at stake, Loring could not go about advising the townspeople to hold on to their properties, with the promise that New Prospect would get the railroad shops, after all. Wyland would know where he had got the information.

But Loring had plenty of time to keep thinking about the matter. Business was at a standstill, and he was idle when Les Harper came in.

HARPER said, "Clear sky—no snow today," as he came up to the grilled window.

He was the owner of the store that was Harry Jennett's competitor. Unlike Jennett, he did not go about sour-faced. But today Les Harper was worried. He asked to renew a note which was due. He could pay the interest, he said, but was unable to reduce the principle.

"I'm hard up, John," he told the banker. "I came here with six hundred dollars in cash and a thousand dollars' worth of stock. Now I'm in debt for twenty-four hundred dollars —to you. And my stock isn't worth a thousand any more."

"Stick it out, Les," Loring said. "I'm not pushing you."

"I hate to leave you holding the bag," Harper went on, "but I've been thinking of closing up. Come spring, this town will be on the rocks. Too many folks planning to move out."

"Things will change, Les."

"Not here," Harper stated. "I can't see it."

"You have my word for it," Loring said, but wasn't sure, when the merchant had left, that Les Harper had any faith in his words.

Stace Wyland came in next. Loring was surprised to see the saloonman, for Wyland did his banking in a safe in his own office. Wyland, however, had not come on ordinary business. He asked if Loring had time to discuss a deal. Loring nodded and invited him back of the partition that divided the room.

Loring sat behind his desk, and Wyland took a chair beside him. He gave the banker a cigar, lighted it, and one for himself. His face was unreadable, but his metallic eyes seemed bright with excitement.

And Loring thought, He's ready to place his bets.

Wyland said, "No use beating around the bush, Loring. I want to buy you out. You've not had a successful year, here in New Prospect, and your chances of keeping your bank open grow slimmer every day. I'll pay you five thousand dollars for your bank—building and business."

"Why, Stace?"

"I like to gamble."

"On what, if you're so sure I'm facing a bank failure?"

"I'll make a killing with my place during the spring and summer, when the construction crews come back to work," Wyland said blandly. "For a few months this town will look like it's booming. And I'll unload this bank at a big profit."

"I could do the same, Stace."

"Not if you have to close your door, which is likely. I can keep open with the money I make at my bar and gambling places. Besides, I happen to have plenty of cash on hand."

Loring puffed on the cigar Wyland had given him, and it was a good one. He was as bland, with as much of a poker face, as the saloonman. But anger was rising in him. He had to fight down an impulse to seize Stace Wyland and throw him out into the street. The man's scheme was clear enough; Wyland hoped to get hold of the bank for a steal price and, through the bank's paper, control town and countryside.

In such fashion, Wyland would be able to grab every local business and almost every farm.

Loring thought, He'd demand payment on all those overdue notes. When payment wasn't made, he'd take over the properties. Wyland wouldn't be gambling. His speculating would be without the element of risk. It couldn't fail. Once he'd taken over the properties, they could be put up for sale at skyrocketed prices to a new bunch of settlers.

Loring said, "Stace, you wouldn't have an idea that the railroad was planning to have its division headquarters here?"

Wyland's eyes flickered. "No," he said flatly.

"I have a hunch that that's behind

this offer of yours."

"Now, hold on, Loring."

"Looks as though you'd let the cat out of the bag," Loring said, grinning. He now could let the news out without endangering Herb Lane's job. Wyland would assume that he had been astute enough to size up the situation merely from his offer to buy him out. He stood up, ending the discussion. "I don't like the deal. I'll stick it out."

WYLAND'S face turned stiff. "Damn it, Loring, I'd be doing you a favor!" he said, rising. "My next offer won't touch this one. You may be the town's banker, but I've got the cash money—and money counts. From now on, I'm bucking you everywhere and in every way I can. You understand?"

"Thanks for the warning," Loring said, and went to open the door for his departing visitor.

Loring had always closed the bank for half an hour at twelve o'clock so that he could go out for his midday meal. Today, he did some visiting in that half-hour. He stopped in at Jim Burke's barber shop and patent medicine store; he visited Langley's blacksmith shop, the lumber yard which Luke Harlan owned, and stopped in at Jeb Watts's carpenter shop.

He went to the Acme Freighting Company and the Prospect Café—which now was not serving meals. He called on the Widow Jarvis who sewed and sold millinery and other feminine things. Last of all, he visited Les Harper's general store. He'd skipped only Harry Jennett's place, knowing Jennett wouldn't welcome him.

Les Harper took the news calmly and shared his scanty meal with the banker.

"It's all right, John," he said, "if true. And if Wyland's gambling on it, it must be true. But how are we going to hold out? We'll be starved out before the snows let up. I've been honest; I've shared my stock of grub with my customers until I haven't enough to eat. Only Wyland and maybe Harry Jennett have enough food on hand to see them through." He shook his head despairingly. "Wyland will get what he wants just by waiting. The weather is his trump card."

"An early thaw—"

"It won't come. And you know it."

"Spring's not so far off, Les."

"We could have this kind of weather all the way into April," the storekeeper said. "I'm telling you, John, this town's in a bad way. I expect some deaths from starvation. And if there should be an epidemic—" He shuddered at the thought.

Loring went back to the bank with his hope again at low ebb. He was fueling his stove with a few sticks of wood and bunches of hay when the bank door rattled open. He looked around and saw that Black Jack Mundy had entered.

The outlaw said, "Don't reach for that shotgun of yours, friend." He was joking, but his smile today wasn't much.

He said, "I'm hungry as a wolf, Loring. You were right. There's no grub in this town, except what Stace Wyland's got cachéd away. I tried to buy a little from him, and he laughed at me. I had a notion to gut-shoot him. Might have, too, only that girl, Bonnie, came between us."

"Jack, this town's been hungry ever since before Christmas."

"Women and kids, too, eh?"

"Sure, Jack."

"Trains can't get through?"

"The tracks are blocked for eighty miles."

"No chance of freighting stuff in by wagon?"

"You know that," Loring said. "It'd be foolhardy for men to risk crossing the plains. Caught in a blizzard, they'd lose their way—freeze to death. You'd better head back to your hideout."

Jack said, "I've got a lot of grub out there. More than you figure. Why, I could feed this whole town. Tell you how I got it. Sam Ruman, the con-

tractor who was building the railroad, would draw on the railroad company for supplies to feed his men and grain for his horses, carloads of it. Ruman got it on credit, but never paid for it. He drew twice as much stuff as he needed, sold half of it to certain hombres who freighted it maybe a hundred miles away. Ruman pocketed the cash."

LORING had heard how the railroad company, the first year, had overcharged Sam Ruman for supplies, so that the contractor had lost money on the season's work. And how the second year, Ruman had finished up by going into bankruptcy so that he would not have to pay the company for the vast amount of supplies he had drawn. It was a dog eat dog sort of business.

Jack Mundy went on, "I had some money this fall. I bought eight tons of grub from Ruman, figuring I'd haul it down to Nebraska and sell it for a big profit. But the winter came too damn quick for me. Loring, I've got beans, flour, bacon at my hideout. Tons of them. I've even got barrels of crackers and cases of dried apples." He paused again, gave the banker another sly look. "That give you an idea, friend?"

"The right idea," John Loring said. "How far is it to your hideout?"

Black Jack Mundy said, "Maybe seventeen miles."

"That means thirty-four miles, out and back," Loring said.

IV

IT WASN'T much of a trip, even for a lumbering freight wagon in decent weather. But with the prairies deep in snow and one blizzard following another, thirty-four miles could be disastrous. One clear day in January, a townsman had driven a mile and a half to a farm for a load of hay for his stove. A blizzard had caught him on the way back, and the man and his team had been found a week later, frozen to death. John Loring had heard of settlers dying between barn and house when a blizzard struck.

"That food cost me eight hundred dollars, Loring," Jack Mundy said.

"I'll give you a thousand for it when it's delivered here," said the banker.

"Who'll haul it in?"

"I'll see Russ Yeager, at Acme Freighting," Loring said and got into his heavy coat and hat.

Russ Yeager wasn't at his wagonyard office. Loring and Jack Mundy found him in Stace Wyland's saloon, along with a dozen other townsmen who found time heavy on their hands. Loring put the proposition to the freighter. Russ Yeager was an old man, lazy by nature, and now cautious. He would not make the trip. Too big a risk.

"It's a crazy idea," he grumbled. "I wouldn't send a dog out of town at a time like this, let alone go myself."

"It's a chance to save this town, Russ."

"A damned slim chance!" Yeager said. "Tell you what I'll do, though. I'll furnish a wagon and four mules if you can find a driver."

Loring looked at Jack Mundy. "What do you say, Jack?"

"Why should I risk my hide," Jack said, "to fill other hombres' bellies. I'm not the one that's hungry." He shook his head. "When I leave here, I'm forking my Old Buck horse. He can run if a blizzard comes up. Nope, if a man that's hungry won't take a chance with a mule team, Black Jack Mundy ain't that loco, either."

Loring looked around and saw how the listening men avoided his gaze. They might be hungry and fear starvation, but they were terrified of the white hell that swept the open prairies.

Harry Jennett, the dour storekeeper, muttered, "A lot of nerve you've got, Loring—going into the store business. What are you trying to do—ruin Les Harper and me?"

"If I get that grub here," Loring retorted, "I'll sell it for what it costs me."

Stace Wyland said mockingly, "Well, you're not getting it here, Banker. No man is going to throw his life away on a risky gamble like that." He puffed on his cigar, smug in his belief that Loring would have to back down. "Or maybe you'll haul it in yourself."

Bonnie Hanlon was there, taking it all in. She looked at Wyland and then at John Loring, her worldly-wise eyes seeming to weigh them both.

She said, "Stace, you're the best fed man in town, so you're in the best condition. You'd have the best chance of getting through."

"A woman can think of the damnedest notions," Wyland said, chuckling.

"You haven't the nerve it takes, Stace."

"It's not a question of nerve," Wyland said angrily. "What's the idea, trying to bait me into it?"

"You claim to be a gambler."

"A sure-thing gambler," Loring broke in. "That's Stace Wyland, a sure-thing gambler. Let up on him, Bonnie. It's nothing to him. Wyland would rather see the town stay hungry. But that grub is coming here!" He turned back to old Russ Yeager. "Hitch up your mules," he said. "I'll drive them."

John Loring drove them. They were four big mules, but the lack of grain had left them gaunt. Russ Yeager had his wagon on runners for the winter.

Word had spread, and most of the town watched the banker-turned-teamster take his rig out of New Prospect. Only one person called out to him, however.

Bonnie cried. "Luck, Banker!" And Loring lifted his whip to her.

BLACK JACK MUNDY followed on his Old Buck horse, a big buckskin gelding with a blotched brand. The outlaw rode behind the rig to make it easier for his mount and called out directions.

"Head for the end of the railroad," he instructed.

Loring followed the new roadbed to the end of the construction work a short mile from town. Jack then told Loring to turn south to Baker's. Loring knew the Baker homestead. It was three miles to the south.

The afternoon remained clear, and the sun was pleasant, even though it gave no warmth. The mules plodded on and on, and the empty wagon rode easily over the deep snow. The Baker farm, a rough board shack and barn, was passed. The unmarked trail now swung southwest to Duck Slough on Willow Creek.

The sun went down, but the night sky was star-studded. It was cold, and John Loring was numb, but there was no wind. The banker began to believe that he was in luck and that the still weather would hold.

It was midnight when they reached Duck Slough, now an ice and snow-covered pond fringed by brush and a few scrub trees. There was a homestead cabin by the slough, and Loring halted his team there.

When Jack rode up alongside, Loring said, "We'll rest a few minutes."

Jack said, "No smoke coming from the chimney."

He rode over to the shanty and, without dismounting, shoved the door open. He peered into the dark shanty, then fumbled in his pocket for a match. After the match flared and went out, he returned to Loring and said, "We'll go on."

"Somebody dead?"

"Froze stiff as a log."

By dawn the mules were played out from plodding through the dry loose snow and bucking the drifts. But before the sun showed, Jack said, "This is it." They had come to Willow Creek.

Black Jack hadn't exaggerated. There was flour in sacks and barrels, beans in hundred-pound bags, cases of slab bacon, cases of dry apples, two

barrels of crackers. And, at the moment even more important, half a dozen sacks of grain mixture for the mules and Jack's horse.

Loring was cold to the core, and dead tired, but the sight of the treasure made him brighten.

"We'll load the sledge, so there'll be room in here for the animals," he said. "We'll rest them until tomorrow morning, then start back."

Jack grumblingly agreed. He was in no mood for such hard work; Loring knew that the outlaw never liked honest toil. But they struggled and strained with bags and barrels. They loaded the sledge to capacity, and still there was a great store of supplies left in the lean-to. They unhitched the mules, took them into the lean-to.

They had shovels in the sledge and used them to dig open the sod hut's drifted door. There was a stone fireplace instead of a stove in the soddy, and Jack started a fire. He had plenty of wood chopped, and soon the two men were warm enough to remove their coats. Jack did the cooking—beans and bacon, coffee and fry-pan biscuits. No meal had ever tasted so good to Banker John Loring.

They slept, woke up, and ate again. They kept the fire roaring. They watered and grained the animals.

That night, by lantern light, the two men gambled at two-handed poker. Loring lost thirteen dollars before midnight. Black Jack brought out a bottle of whisky, and they nearly emptied it. In every way they were as unlike as men could be, yet John Loring had never felt so kindly disposed toward any man as he did toward this stocky, yellow-haired outlaw.

He said finally, "Jack, why don't you quit your wild ways?"

The younger man grinned. "Could you stop being a banker, John?"

IT WASN'T an answer, yet it was answer enough. Black Jack Mundy liked the sort of life he led. He would follow his twisted trail until a lawman's bullet stopped him. Loring had a notion that the young fellow would never hang.

He said, "Let's turn in. We'll get an early start in the morning."

In the morning, the sky was ominously bleak.

When the sun shone at all that day it was no brighter than a gold piece reflecting lamplight. The dirty-cotton clouds obscured it. There still was little wind, and that was good—so long as the condition lasted.

Rested and grain-fed, knowing they were homeward bound, the mules were almost eager. John Loring made Duck Slough by two in the afternoon. Despite the corpse in the homestead shanty, Loring and his companion halted by the slough for an hour.

They watered and grained the animals, built a fire and cooked a meal. They were in good spirits, even jovial, except when they studied the threatening clouds. With the team rested, they headed northeast toward the Baker farm. Black Jack was riding beside Loring now and had his horse tied to the tail-gate.

"You figure we'll make Baker's before dark?" the outlaw asked.

Loring said he was counting on it, but the pace of the mules was slower than it had been that morning. By five o'clock, on Loring's watch, it was dark. But they saw a light ahead and kept going toward it. Half an hour later they pulled up to Clet Baker's place.

The farmer welcomed them, and the whole family—Mrs. Baker and five children—were almost overcome with excitement when the two visitors gave them a side of bacon, a sack of flour, and some dried apples. The homesteaders had been existing on a diet of sod potatoes for months.

Loring and Jack shared the meal Mrs. Baker prepared, after putting up their animals in the rickety plank barn. It was something of a party; the family was as starved for companionship as for food.

It was near midnight when Loring said, "Jack, those mules should be rested enough."

Black Jack protested. He wanted to stay over until morning, for he had a full belly and was drowsy from sitting beside the Baker stove. But Loring was insistent. He did not know why, but he felt a pressing urge to move on. It was almost a hunch. He was sure that now was the time to start on the last five miles of the laborious trip—and he was both right and wrong in his belief.

Hay they stayed over, the blizzard would have kept them trapped until it blew itself out. As it was, the swirling snowstorm caught the two men on the open prairies.

There was one terrific gust of wind, at first, then a steady pressure of the gale. The snow came whipping at the team and sledge, at the two men huddled on the seat. Icy particles stung their faces like myriad needles jabbing. Loring's hands grew so cold, despite his gloves, that he had no feel of the ribbons. The mules kept trudging ahead, and Loring swung them more to the east.

Black Jack yelled thinly, "Keep north, damn it! You want to get lost in this storm?"

Loring didn't answer. He kept going east for what he judged was a mile, then put the mules straight north. He had a reason for the maneuver. He didn't want to miss the end of the telegraph poles that marked the railroad. By swinging more to the east, he figured his chances of finding the line of poles—now his only landmark—would be better. For he would be feeling his way now. He was all but blind. At times he could not see the rumps of the mules.

There was nothing but the swirling, murky whiteness, the howl of the wind, and the numbing cold. Tears ran from his eyes, and the icy snow struck agony into his eyeballs. Loring goraned, and Black Jack Mundy cursed.

THEY went on like that through a maelstrom of chaos, trusting to blind luck, hoping that the mules were still headed in the right direction.

There was no telling by the gale. It had struck out of the north, but now the wind seemed to blow from every direction, sometimes even with a terrific downward pressure. The minutes seemed hours, an hour an eternity. The mules began to falter, and the blacksnake whip served no purpose.

Loring gave the reins to Black Jack and dropped down from the sledge. The gale punched at him, but he made it to the nearest animal. Loring's gloved hands found the trouble. The mules couldn't breathe. Condensation had formed choking ice at their nostrils. The icicles had to be broken away from each of the four mules, then Loring went to perform the same operation on Black Jack's horse.

They went on again, battling fury with diminishing strength. Finally Black Jack wailed, "I'm leaving you—you and this damn wagon!"

But he didn't go. For once there was fear in the outlaw. He stayed there on the sledge, shivering violently, cursing in a panicky voice. Fear was in the banker, too. He felt the cold eating deeper and deeper into him. There was a knot of pain in his stomach, a cramp that made him want to double over and let the cold have its way with him.

Worse still was the feeling of blindness, of not knowing if he were guiding the team north to the railroad and the little town that huddled by it.

V

JOHN LORING tried to gauge the distance, and was only more bewildered. He knew that in this swirling density there was real danger of passing the telegraph poles without seeing them. That preyed on his mind. If he drove past the snow-clogged roadbed onto the plains beyond, he and Jack would be done for.

At last he reined in and shouted above the din, "Get on your horse partner, tie the end of your lass'-rope to your saddle-horn, and give me the loop around my arm!"

Black Jack Mundy gave him an uncomprehending look out of aching eyes.

"We'll stretch the rope taut," Loring told him. "You flank the sledge and try to catch a telegraph pole."

The young outlaw understood then and climbed stiffly down from the seat. He felt his way back and returned leading his Old Buck horse. Each man took an end of the rope, and Jack mounted his ice-matted horse. They went on that way, lost to each other's sight, yet bound together. They went on and on, and the rope came up against nothing on the barren snow flats.

Loring told himself that they had missed the poles, that they were already beyond their mark. Then suddenly he was jerked violently. The rope had tugged hard at his arm. Loring pulled up and shouted wildly for his companion. Jack came in on the rope.

He leaned from the saddle and yelled, "We caught a pole, all right, but only because of the riata!"

It was easier after that, knowing the direction. They turned east, to the right, and followed the telegraph poles, one after the other. Finally there was a light ahead, dimly seen, but still a light, the lighted window of the railroad station at New Prospect town.

Black Jack Mundy pulled out his gun and fired three quick shots into the gale. He began to laugh and yell crazily. . . .

That was on Saturday night. Sunday, John Loring slept late and, after rising, he did nothing more than cook a meal and tend his fire. He was grateful for a day of rest. His muscles ached. His hands and feet were frostbitten and tormented him. His face had been whipped raw by wind and snow. The cold had caused his lips to crack. And he couldn't get warm.

But he was easy in his mind. He had turned his wagon load of supplies over to Les Harper for a fair distribution and he knew that the townspeople would be fighting their way through the storm for their share of the precious food. Loring felt that he had done his part in keeping New Prospect going.

John Loring was sure that the fortunes of the town would take a turn for the better. He was counting on the railroad's having its division headquarters at New Prospect, on more people and businesses coming in, and on the coming spring and summer being kind to the ranchers.

It was a shoddy but a good town; it was hard, but fertile land. Everyone who suffered the winter through would realize that when spring came. And there was more food at Black Jack's hideout if more were needed.

John Loring lighted a cigar. He was indeed content.

It was after he had cooked and eaten his evening meal that an urgent knock sounded on his door. He called out, "Come in," thinking it would be Jack Mundy come for his thousand dollars.

But it was Bonnie Hanlon who quickly opened and closed the door behind her. She stood leaning against the door, breathing hard, her cheeks red from the cold. Loring was speechless. He could only stare.

Some women remain attractive only so long as they are in the bloom of youth. But Bonnie Hanlon was not one of them. Her beauty was a lasting thing that had its own youth. John Loring thought of that now, surprised though he was to have her there in what he called his home.

He went to her, took her arm, led her close to his stove. He still did not know what to say.

BONNIE had no mocking smile for him tonight. There was worry in

her eyes, or perhaps fear. After a moment, she said. "The storm almost did for me, just crossing the street. I don't see how you managed to travel so far through it last night."

"Jack and I had luck," Loring heard himself say.

"Yes. Yes, you had luck. But now—"

"Something's wrong, Bonnie?"

"Stace Wyland didn't want you back with that food," the girl said. "He was counting on you dying out on the plains in the snow. He wants your bank, John, so he can control this town, and he won't be satisfied till he's got it."

"There's nothing he can do now," Loring said. "I'll keep the bank open somehow. I'll keep the business people and farmers going."

"He won't have it that way," Bonnie told him. "That's why I came." She drew a sharp breath. She seemed to strengthen her resolve. "After what you did, it's only right for you to be warned. They'll get you tonight if you go to the saloon. If not tonight, then some other time."

"How, Bonnie?"

"You remember the men who stole Jeb Watts's cow?" she asked. Then, not waiting for a reply, "Dutch Schultz and Ike Payson came into town before the blizzard struck. They've been at Wyland's saloon ever since. Wyland's been talking to them, building up their hatred for you and Jack Mundy. I heard some of what was said. Stace Wyland means to use them to get rid of you."

"What's his plan, Bonnie?"

"I don't know all of it. I had to be careful so they wouldn't suspect I was listening. But I know Wyland means to get Jack drunk and keep him drunk. When you show up at the saloon, Schultz and Payson will pick a fight with Jack Mundy."

Loring nodded and said, "I think I see it." It was a dirty game that had been played many times. A fight started between gunmen, and an unarmed bystander killed, supposedly by mistake.

Loring crossed the room and opened a trunk that stood by the wall. It contained a few clothes, some books and other odds and ends, and a gun that he took in his hand. It was a five-shot .38 caliber weapon, much lighter than the guns packed by most men. But years ago, on the expert advice of an old gunsmith, Loring had learned that a lighter weapon was more easily handled and aimed than a long-barreled .44 or .45 caliber. And his weapon would be just as deadly.

He checked the loads in the gun, then slipped it into the pocket of his overcoat. He pulled on the coat, put on his hat. He found Bonnie watching him in that worried way that was so new to her.

He wondered, can she be afraid for me?

He said, "I don't understand why you warned me. I always had an idea that you didn't think much of me."

"Maybe I'm a little like Stace Wyland," Bonnie said, "and envied you your respectability and the position you hold in this town. After all, I'm only a faro dealer. And I know what your opinion of me must be."

"You don't know at all, Bonnie."

"Now what do you mean by that, Mr. Loring?"

"When I look at you, I see a woman —not a faro dealer."

"It's nice of you to say that."

"I mean it, Bonnie. Will you stay here until this is over?"

"Yes, John, if you want me to."

Loring said, "I want you to," and went out into the storm.

He fought his way across the street to Wyland's hotel-saloon. He entered and shoved the door closed, then as his eyes became accustomed to the lamplight, saw that Stace Wyland was behind the bar. Black Jack Mundy, looking drunk, was in front of it. Ike Payson and the bearded Dutch Schultz, who seemed to have recovered from his wound, sat at a table

with bottle and glasses. Half a dozen townsmen were huddled about the stove.

LORING went to the near end of the bar, laid out a quarter. "Brandy, Stace," he said.

Jack Mundy looked at him in the dull-witted way of a drunk. The outlaw said, "How about my thousand dollars, Banker?"

"Tomorrow, Jack. Come to the bank."

"I'll be there, sure."

Ike Payson left his table, came toward the bar. Dutch Schultz remained seated, his right hand inside his coat. Loring saw all that as he drained his glass. He knew how it would be worked. Payson would pick a fight with Jack Mundy. The outlaw would go for his gun. Schultz would side Payson, and a shot would come Loring's way.

Loring thought grimly, Ike Payson could collect the bounty offered by the railroad for Black Jack Mundy, and Schultz will collect from Wyland for my hide—maybe. He thrust his right hand into his coat pocket, closed it about his gun.

Payson stopped at the bar close to Jack Mundy. A swarthy, mean-looking hardcase, he growled, "Give me another bottle, Wyland."

Wyland set a bottle before him. Payson reached. His arm jerked, and the bottle toppled over and dropped behind the bar. Payson whirled and bellowed at Mundy,

"What's the idea, shoving me?"

He cursed the outlaw, and Loring saw both men go for their guns.

The banker yelled, "Payson, I'll back-shoot you!" As he spoke, he was throwing down on Dutch Schultz with his .38, and none too soon.

Schultz fired without rising from his chair. Four guns were blasting. The barroom seemed to rock with the roar of shots. The men around the stove had flung themselves flat on the floor. Loring fired two shots, and saw Dutch Schultz go down, carrying table and chair over with him. He whirled about, but Black Jack Mundy needed no help. Ike Payson was slowly collapsing, had already dropped his gun.

Black Jack Mundy had backed to the middle of the room, but he still faced the bar. He was dripping blood onto the plank floor from a wound in his left side. His boyish face had turned stiff and ugly. He didn't look drunk now.

Stace Wyland rose slowly from behind the bar, having dropped down there when the shooting started. His face was gray.

Jack Mundy had holstered his .45. "Your turn now, Stace," he said. "You were in on it. I saw the signal you gave Payson and Schultz when the banker came in. I wasn't blind drunk, like you think."

"You've got it wrong, Jack!" Wyland gasped. "Hold on, now—"

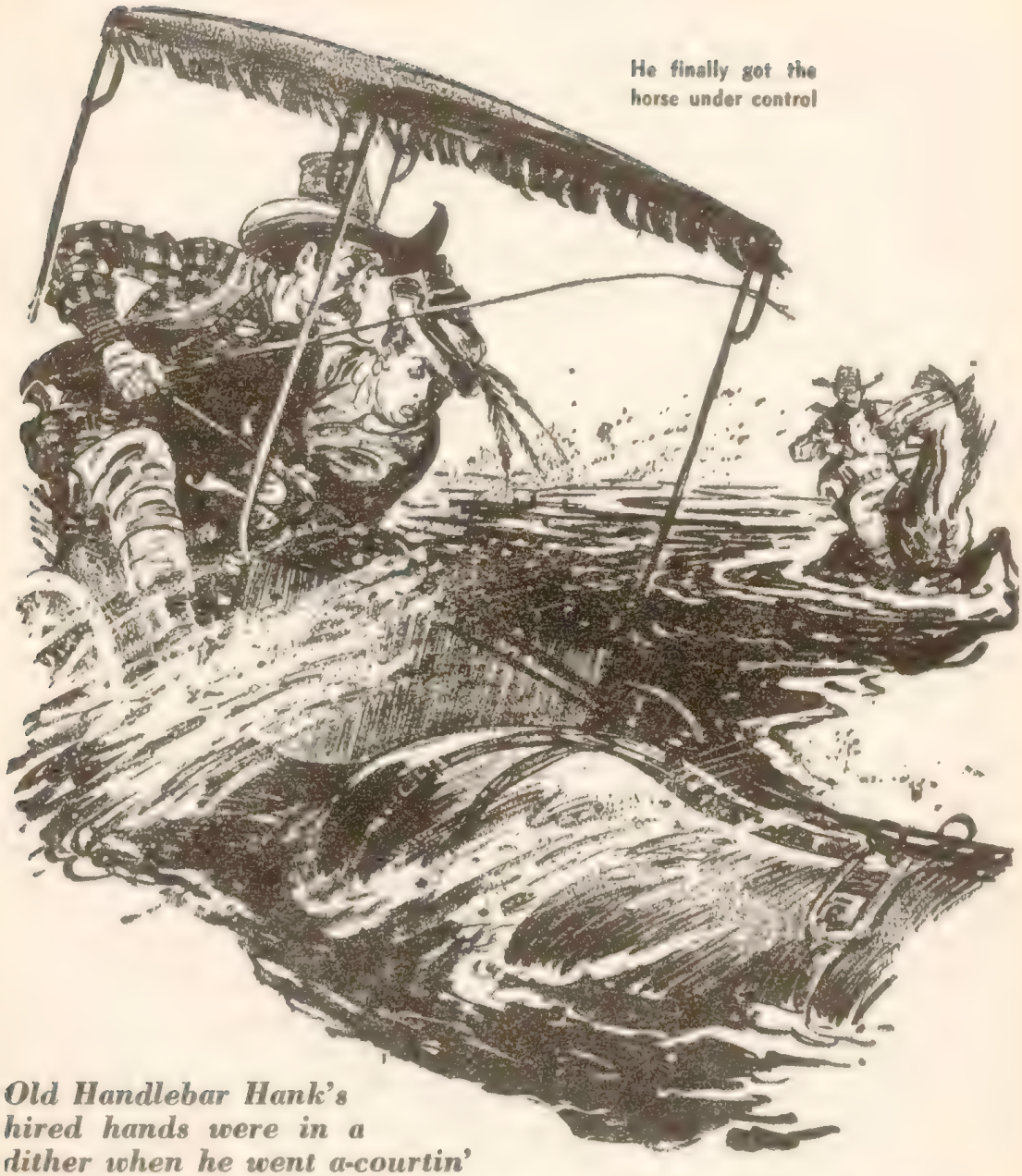
"He was in on it, Jack," Loring said. "I have Bonnie's word for it."

The outlaw said, "You've got a pocket gun, Wyland. I'm giving you a chance to grab for it. If you don't grab, I'll kill you, anyway. Take your choice!"

Wyland looked wildly at Loring and saw no hope there. He reached inside his coat. Black Jack Mundy let him get the derringer all the way out before he drew his own gun. Even so, Stace Wyland wasn't fast enough. He jerked at the impact of Mundy's bullet and crumpled in a heap to the floor.

John Loring didn't stay to talk over the fight with the men who had witnessed it. He helped doctor Jack Mundy's wound, which turned out to be nothing more serious than torn flesh and broken ribs. Then the banker left the saloon and battled his way across the stormy street.

He was in a hurry to get home to his rooms. They would not be cold, since Bonnie Hanlon was there to watch the fire. Nor from then on would they be lonely. ● ● ●



He finally got the horse under control

Old Handlebar Hank's hired hands were in a dither when he went a-courtin'

The GENERAL'S GUN

By DAVID LAVENDER

ALL who knew Handlebar Hank Rumford agreed that he was a man of uncommon purpose—just as his mustache, reaching like horns far out from his scaly jaws, was an uncommon hirsute adornment. For

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years he had lived in a manner befitting this glorious appendage.

He could ride farther, swear louder, and drink deeper than any other man on Colorado's western slope. And so perhaps it was only natural that when love came to him in the Indian summer of a spectacular career, he should uproot his entire outfit—complete from cherished ten-gauge shotgun, gift of Ulysses S. Grant himself, down to the runtiest dogie calf—and hurl it all at the uncertain target of matrimony.

His three hired hands preceded him with his herd while Hank followed at their heels in a wagon pulled by three yoke of oxen, or as Antonio Madrill termed them, "ze bools."

It was a small wagon, covered mostly with dust, and groaning dangerously under the bulk of Handlebar's movable possessions, including, along with the usual crockery, bed springs and half-tanned cowhides, his favorite cookstove and his forge. Lashed to the apex of this towering load was a five-gallon keg filled with a raw, clear fluid known to its initiates as "Old Gurkenheimer" and averred by those who study such things to outpower even Taos Lightning by half a million volts.

Hank's three riders had cast frequent looks upon this keg. To no avail. Handlebar was hoarding the treasure for his wedding celebration, and hints rolled off his scrawny neck as imperviously as Old Gurkenheimer had once rolled down his throat. His men could not understand.

"Anyone else, *si*," sighed Antonio Madrill. "But for Hank—" He turned a beseeching glance upon Gentleman Sid Meachem. "What can we do to save heem?"

Sid swung his braided bullwhip and, with a thunderous crack, removed a gadfly from the hip of a spotted steer. He was a knowing man, Sid was, and looked it with his yellow goatee and curling, shoulder-length hair. To his companions his decisions were the ultimate.

"I don't reckon there's anything we can do. Hank's hooked for fair."

THE three riders squirmed unhappily and in their helplessness ignored their employer. It was folly. They should have considered the growing tilt of the land and the vacuous state in which romance had left Handlebar's mind. Suddenly they heard behind them a rush of hoofs and a screech of ungreased wheels. Spinning about, they beheld catastrophe.

"The brake!" Antonio gasped. "She is bust!"

Tongues out and eyes astare in an effort to keep ahead of the wagon, the six oxen all but flew into the heart of the herd, scattering steers right and left. Hank's horse, tied to the tailgate, whinnied in terror and broke loose. The mount was the only one to escape. The lead bull tripped on a root. Down he went, plump in the way of the caroming vehicle.

Dust mercifully cloaked the scene. Here and there the amazed riders glimpsed a thrashing leg, a tail, or a piece of hardware flying into space.

"Incredible," murmured Gentleman Sid Meachem, who was, among other things, a bit of an artist. Setting spurs to his horse, he took out in pursuit.

Like an old man settling into a rocking chair, the wagon toppled. There were subdued sounds of splintering, crunching, and crackling. The keg detached itself from the load and bounded down the hillside and out of sight between two junipers. Boxcar Kelley, the third of Hank's riders, uttered a stricken cry.

"The Gurkenheimer!"

Clapping his hat down on the flank of his roan, he bolted after it, oblivious to his employer who was just then creeping forth from the wreckage in the dazed manner of a man wakened from a beautiful dream.

Antonio eyed the oxen. Freed of the wagon, they had kicked the harness loose and were rising stiffly to their feet. Pop-eyed, he rode on.

"Boss," he reported in awe, "you dehorn' every wan of zoze bools!"

Hank came to life with a start.

"The hell with the bulls!" he roared.

His mustache — the magnificent mustache which had given him his name—bristled in alarm. With a frightened croak he dived back into the shambles, pawing through the strewn goods like a dog digging for a bone.

"Where's my gun?" he shouted.

Sid Meachem dismounted to aid in the search and at length spotted the weapon in a sage bush. Tenderly he picked it up. It was the champion man mauler of his experience, a tremendous ten-gauge, single-barreled shotgun, shoulder tall, with a muzzle that reminded him of looking down a well.

What was more, it was beautiful. And historic. Flying steel ducks and stately cattails decorated the breech. Under these artistic triumphs was a legend engraved in fine Spencerian script:

To Henry Rumford
with grateful memories from
ULYSSES S. GRANT.

Gentleman Sid shivered ecstatically. Few things or people claimed his respect, but Handlebar Hank was one. And this gun, memento of Grant's trip to the Colorado Territory in '68, where Hank, himself a veteran of Shiloh and of Vicksburg, had been the general's guide, was another. Destiny lay here. Not long after the arrival of the gun from the East, Grant had been elected President of the United States.

To hear Hank tell the tale, as he often did, there could have been sensed an indubitable connection beween the two events. And now Grant not only had been President for two terms, but just last year had signed a bill making Colorado the thirty-eighth state of the Union. Yes, this gun had felt the touch of history.

With bated breath Sid examined the weapon for signs of injury. Discounting a microscopic nick in the barrel and a scratch along the underside of the stock, there were none. Relaxing, he carried it to his frantic employer.

Handlebar took it with tears in his eyes.

"The General! Thankee, Sid, thankee kindly! I'd ruther lose my whiskers than have anything happen to this here gun." He spat on the scratched stock and polished it with his sleeve. "Nothing a little bear oil won't fix. But fry my hide if I don't take better care of it from now on!"

HE DELVED into the wreckage, tore open a canvas warbag, removed from it a suit of long underwear, and with a clasp knife slashed off both legs of the garment. Gently he encased the gun in these and laced the wooly scabbard tight with thongs cut from a pack saddle.

The General thus secured, he turned his mind to lesser things. After glancing at the wreckage, he spoke cheerfully.

"It could have been worse," he said. "The cookstove is dented some, and the crockery don't amount to much no more, but the rest of the stuff we can bend back into shape."

"Not the wagon," Sid pointed out. "It's shy a tongue and a nigh wheel."

Hank waved his hand in dismissal. "We'll send back some new pieces from Montrose." A fatuous grin elevated his mustache. "The main thing is to push ahead with the cows and meet Valentine on schedule."

Antonio Madrill shuddered involuntarily, and Sid knew why. Valentine was Mrs. Samantha Prosser, Handlebar's thrice-wedded fiancée. With each of his predecessors she had operated a boarding house near three different mining camps, and now she meant to do the same with Handlebar.

She had located her inn on the Uncompahgre River, where she could catch the trade of miners who were swarming across the Ute Indian lands to new silver strikes in the San Juan Mountains. And such was the state

of Hank's mind that she had convinced him he could realize more profit from selling his beef on the platter than he could from selling it on the hoof.

Not only had she wrought this miracle of persuasion in six short months, but Hank still called her Valentine, after the day on which he had met her. It was enough to make a man shudder.

Handlebar detected Antonio's disapproval. His mustache began to quiver, but whatever he intended to say was interrupted by the reappearance of Boxcar Kelley. The man was afoot, leading his roan, and in his huge, hairy hands he carried the remnants of the keg with care, for in its bottom sloshed a few cupfuls of liquid, alkali clouded but still potable.

"She hit a rock," he announced dismally. "This is all that's left."

"An omen!" Antonio breathed.

Handlebar glared. "Meaning what?"

"Ze kag was for ze wedding. She go *pfft*. Maybe-so ze wedding—" He beamed happily.

A curious purple flush suffused Handlebar's cheeks.

"*Pfft!*" The disparagement to both his love and his judgment echoed in his howl. "Why, you misbegotten lizard! You'd admire to see it *pfft*, wouldn't you?"

Antonio quailed, realizing too late his error. His was an uncomplicated soul, sensitive and loyal. Like his companions, he worshiped Handlebar Hank without quite knowing why, and now his stricken gaze pleaded for understanding.

"No. Eef only—"

"Only what?"

Antonio's eyes rolled helplessly and came to rest on the sun-baked sweep of the Uncompahgre Valley, blue-shimmering in the heat. Somewhere in these desolate wastes, south toward the San Juans, lay their new home. He flung out an expressive hand.

"You will have to admit eet ees not like ze Gunnison."

Hank's own gaze turned toward the valley. He swallowed, then glared back at Antonio.

"What if it ain't?" he growled. "If you don't like it, you know what you can do!"

Antonio blinked. This—after ten years of riding the same trails!

Gentleman Sid saw his dismay and stepped into the breach .

"The heat's getting us dizzy," he said. "And here's a stiff horn of Old Gurk just going to waste. Let's have a toast to—" he choked and rushed on —"to old times."

"Pah!" said Handlebar Hank.

GATHERING the beflanneled General into his arms, he stalked off to catch his horse and brood.

The trio stared at his receding back.

"He wouldn't even take a drink!" Boxcar Kelley said in a stifled voice.

The minutes limped. Boxcar shifted the keg in his hands and looked inquiringly at his companions. Disconsolate, they shook their heads. Even Old Gurkenheimer could not soothe them now. With a sigh Boxcar turned the battered keg upside down, and in silence they watched the liquid disappear into the hot sand.

Antonio lifted his wizened face to Gentleman Sid.

"We mus' do zomezing!" he said.

"Yes," Sid agreed and tugged at his goatee. He drew a deep breath. "Boys, we've sized this up all wrong."

"How so?"

"Hank's our friend, no matter what. He's in love and he's happy. 'Stead of croaking over him like a herd of buzzards, the way we been doing, we ought to be happy with him."

"But we ain't happy," Boxcar protested. A huge and hirsute man, he was as forthright as his red beard.

"We can pretend to be," Sid replied. "We can shine up to—Valentine. Make him think we approve of his choice. Give him a rousing send-off on his wedding. And then—"

"And then go to work in his hash house!" Boxcar exploded.

Sid paled. "No, no boarding houses.

After this wedding, we'll find a new outfit to ride for. One where there ain't no Valentine."

They looked at each other in desolation. There were other ranges, but none like the Gunnison; other employers, but none like Handlebar Hank. An era had closed. Yet what could they do?

"Just these last few days," Sid said. "For Hank.'

"For Hank." With solemn nods they sealed the pact.

Two mornings later they reached the outskirts of the wooden hamlet of Montrose. Here, dusty-throated, they drew lots to determine who should watch the cows while the others rode into town. Antonio lost, and philosophically settled down in the shade of a cedar tree. He didn't expect to see his companions again until the following day.

He was wrong. Not an hour later they were back, glum-faced.

"Pack up," Sid said. "We're moving. Home, happy home."

"Why so soon?"

"Valentine's done built her hash house and is in a sweat to have a grand opening. Hank and her is staying in town to buy the knicknacks. We're to start ahead with the cattle. They'll catch up tomorrow." Sid spat reflectively. "For a fat woman, that Valentine sure does move fast."

Boxcar snorted in his beard. "There's trade going by her door, and she's afraid she might lose a nickel."

"Careful!" Sid warned. "Them's the kind of sentiments we promised to avoid. You'd best butter up to Valentine. Like you meant it, too. Hank's suspicious."

"How can I butter up," Boxcar protested, "when she won't get no closer to me than if I was a boar hog?"

"Just bide your time. A chance will come. And now we'd better hustle."

Hustle they did. By the next afternoon they were well up the Uncompahgre, almost into the shadows of the San Juans. They had put behind them a tumultuous river ford which, swollen by rains higher in the mountains, almost drowned the gaunt cattle before the crossing was completed.

Well satisfied with their progress, the riders decided to let the herd rest.

Company drifted into their camp—several bearded miners and a sprinkling of half-naked Ute Indians who had been attracted by the hullabaloo of the fording. The visitors gathered under the cottonwood trees and watched the emigrants unload the few alkali-whitened objects they had been able to bring with them on pack horse from the wrecked wagon.

THE General, disguised in its underwear, attracted no attention, and Antonio stowed it carefully away in the crotch of a tree.

While he was doing that a fringe-topped buggy rattled impressively down the opposite slope to the ford. Handlebar Hank held the reins. Beside him lolled a woman with three red feathers in her hat and a folded black-and-white parasol in her hands.

At the edge of the stream the buggy mare stopped. Hank leaned over the dashboard, his stance hesitant. His companion argued. Hank gave in with a shrug, and plied his whip.

Snorting, the mare staggered halfway across the roily river, found a gravel bar in the middle and came to a stubborn halt. She was belly-deep already, and the remainder of the turgid current did not appeal to her.

A driftwood log bobbed down the current, smacked the rear end of the light buggy, and sheered it around at right angles to its former course. Valentine—Mrs. Samantha Prosser—began to scream.

Gentleman Sid came to his feet. His eyes glowed with inspiration.

"Boxcar!" he said. "There's your chance!"

"Me?" Kelley said in horror.

"Your roan is the stoutest horse here. And a rescue will put us in solid with Hank. Get moving!"

Reluctantly Boxcar saddled his roan and breasted the flood. Miners and

Indians poured to the river bank to watch the outcome.

All went well until the rider reached the side of the buggy. There, frightened either by the feathers in Mrs. Prosser's hat or by the energetic way in which she brandished her parasol, the roan began to rear.

For a wild three minutes Boxcar had all he could manage just to stay aboard, but finally he got the horse under control.

"Jump!" he bawled and held forth a treelike arm.

Valentine squealed and drew back. The roan pawed, let out a trumpet neigh of vexation, and strained toward the shore. Boxcar swore in despair. Another moment, and the chance would be gone.

With a suden burst of decision he reached out, seized Mrs. Prosser about the knees, and dumped her—parasol, hat, and all—over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

He was none too soon. The roan lunged for the shore, and in the turmoil the unfortunate rider had no time to consider geography. He advanced with his cargo stern on. A breeze rippled across the water and exposed fleetingly to view certain garments which few of the miners and none of the Indians had ever seen before.

Boxcar, his hands full of horse and Valentine, was blissfully ignorant of his error. He set Mrs. Prosser on dry land, grinned, and waited for her thanks.

"You uncouth fool!" Mrs. Prosser screeched and swung her parasol.

Because of his beard, the blow hurt Kelley's dignity more than his face.

"Now, see here, ma'am. I—"

The parasol was raised again. Boxcar gulped, fled and rejoined his pals.

"Imagine having that for a strawboss!" he panted. "A regular shepanther! What het her up so?"

Sid cleared his throat. "She figures you made her look—uh—foolish. Dangerous thing with a woman."

"That cooks it!" Boxcar sighed. "Nothing to do now but fish Handlebar out of the drink—if we can get some of these miners to tie onto the buggy." He turned to Antonio Madrill. "Tony, watch the camp, case these sticky-fingered Utes get notions. And pour the old oil on if you find a chance."

Antonio shivered, cast a sideward glance upon Mrs. Prosser, and retreated to the far side of the fire. The miners crept away, leaving the woman in a kind of human vacuum. Sniffing, she shook her clothes into order and watched efforts to free her lover.

IT WAS rather a dull process, and she had other thoughts on her mind. Presently she advanced toward Antonio, the double ruffles of her mauve skirt trailing tendrils of dust.

Heedful of Sid's admonition, Antonio doffed his hat, but Mrs. Prosser's gaze swept past him to the camp. Her eyes alarmed Antonio. They could turn a man inside out and yet reveal nothing; they could even veer at the snap of a finger from sunlight to ice. "Boarding house eyes," Sid called them.

Failing to locate what she wanted, she beamed on the camp tender.

"The general's gun," she said. "Where is it?"

Antonio stiffened. Few complexities lurked behind his wizened forehead, and for ten years the general's gun had been one of the paramount facts of his life. Outsiders, even though they were on their way to becoming insiders, simply did not touch it without Hank's express permission. Antonio remained silent.

"Well!" Mrs. Prosser's eyes icy cold. "Get it for me! At once!"

Sweat beaded Antonio's brow. He dared not defy her, and he could not comply. Stricken, he fled to his sole refuge, the vagaries of language.

"*No entiendo,*" he murmured.

He meant, "I do not understand," but Mrs. Prosser had never learned Spanish. She was also a bit deaf.

"You don't intend to!" Her voice went up a notch. "Of all the barefaced insolence! I—"

She broke off. Handlebar had landed and was coming toward them. Mrs. Prosser melted into the protection of his presence and turned upon him eyes that were limpid and hurt.

"Henry," she pouted, "I asked this —this man to show me your gun. And he refused!"

Handlebar's brows bent together. So! Once again his crew was scorning his chosen one and, as a corollary, his judgment! Outraged pride shook his mustache, and of a sudden Antonio wished that he, the bravest of the Madrillas, had never been born.

"You heard her!" Handlebar roared.

"Señor, I—"

"Get it!"

Feet dragging, Antonio obeyed. Hank stripped the underwear legs from the General and handed it to his bride-to-be. She all but clutched it from his fingers. Her face was avid.

"From Ulysses S. Grant!" It seemed to Antonio that her voice rang with triumph. "There's not another one like it in the world!"

"It ain't bad." Handlebar hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and smirked as if he'd made the gun himself. "I figure to get in some good shooting with it this fall, soon as we're settled."

A tightness came into Mrs. Prosser's cheeks.

"Shooting?" she asked.

Handlebar stared. "What else is a shotgun for?"

"Of course." She giggled quickly and swayed against his shoulder. "I am a silly, ain't I?"

"Valentine," Handlebar said, and gave his mustache a gallant twirl, "you're sweeter'n a molasses jug."

She handed the gun to Gentleman Sid, dividing a withering look between Antonio and Boxcar Kelley, and sauntered ofl with her fiancé. Antonio watched them with a frown.

"Why she so excite' about *El General?*"

"It's a good gun," Boxcar said, and rubbed his belabored jaw. "It don't look like you and me are much shucks as butter spreaders, Tony. Time Valentine gets through roasting us to Hank, we'll be lucky if he don't fire us 'fore we can quit." His forthright face grew somber. "I sure don't want to go off and leave him soured on us thisaway."

Antonio gulped. "There mus' be somezing we can do!"

"Maybe," Sid suggested, "if we was to bring him a fresh keg of Old Gurkenheimer—"

Boxcar scowled. "It's a hun'erd-and-fifty-mile ride!"

"Can you think of a better wedding present?"

THEY looked at each other and began to hope again.

"For Hank!" Boxcar said. "By cracky, we'll do 'er! When he sends us back for the wagon, we'll slip off and do 'er!"

It meant fast traveling. While Antonio and Boxcar repaired the stranded wagon, Gentleman Sid led a pack mule for two days and a night through thunder and rain and returned, triumphant, with not one but two kegs.

Uncertain as to how Valentine would regard their gift, they cached the kegs in a willow thicket half a mile below the boarding house and went ahead to reconnoiter.

Mrs. Prosser's establishment, they had to admit, showed the touch both of experience and of ambition. The main building, constructed of spruce logs hauled down the canyon from Ouray, was flauntingly roofed with tar paper. A deep veranda lined the front. There was glass in the windows.

Three or four Ute Indians were raking the yard with cottonwood branches and were sprinkling the dust with water from a rain barrel. Evidently some stupendous event was in the making.

As the wagon creaked into the corral, Hank hurried from the house to greet his men. Delighted with themselves, they told him what they had done. His Adam's apple jumped in his throat; moisture filmed his eyes. Then, unbelievably, he shook his head.

"I'm obliged to ye, boys. Indeed I am. But I'll have to skip 'er for today."

"Why?" Sid demanded.

"Valentine's moved the wedding

up." Hank ducked his head and grinned inanely. "Said there wa'n't no use waiting, with the house ready and all. We're going to have the splicing this evening. A real jamboree—folks coming plumb from Montrose and Telluride." He paused and reddened. "Sid, will you ride up to that camp on Dallas Creek and borrow a pair of sheep shears?"

"What for?"

Hank whinnied in embarrassment. "A fellow ought to get trimmed up on his wedding day, oughtn't he?" To cover his confusion he turned on Antonio and Boxcar. "While Sid's gone, I want you two boys to take the buggy to the Indian agency and get the minister. He's expecting you."

"Minister?" Boxcar's jaw sagged.

"How else does a man get hitched, you fathead?" he roared. "Now stir your stumps! We've heaps to do 'fore evening." Furious, he stalked off.

It has been said by some carping critics that no one who indulged in Old Gurkenheimer ever lived long enough to become an addict. For years Antonio and Boxcar had depended on its sovereign powers, and it did not fail them today.

After an hour's stop in the willow thicket, they found the courage they needed to knock upon the door of the agency cabin which housed the Reverend Jeremiah Beazley.

He appeared at once, they identified themselves, and for a space they studied each other. In fairness to Mr. Beazley it must be admitted that Boxcar's beard bristled like a porcupine and that none of Antonio's gentler qualities were visible on the surface.

"So this is it!" Boxcar rumbled.

Antonio understood. Boxcar meant only that the man was a symbol of the end which tonight would come to their whole way of living.

The Reverend Beazley, however, failed to grasp the impersonal quality of this remark and flushed painfully. He was young and earnest and had reached the Indian agency from Boston only a week before, having been sent there to convert the Utes.

[*Turn page*]

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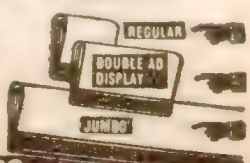

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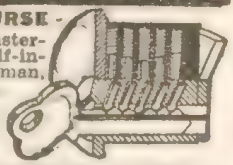

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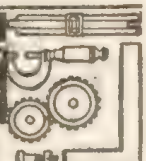

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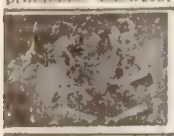

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The past days had brought several shocks to his nervous system, and Boxcar's greeting did little to reassure him. He stood hesitant, at a loss for words.

WEDGING him between them in the front seat of the buggy, they rode in morose silence for several miles. At last Boxcar spoke speculatively to Antonio.

"If the Reverend don't show up, they can't have no wedding," he said.

"That ees so. But how will we explain to Hank?"

"We might drive over a cliff."

"Eet would ruin ze buggy."

They drove on. The Reverend Beazley closed his eyes and wondered how one person, alone in the wilderness, coped with madmen.

Under the light of a blood-red sunset they reached the willow thicket. Boxcar drew rein.

"Do we?" he asked Antonio.

His compañero shrugged. "Why not?"

They climbed from the buggy and disappeared into the brush which, unknown to the Reverend Beazley, cached the Gurkenheimer.

In a spasm of misapprehension, the terrified missionary seized the reins and fled down the road to the boarding house, leaving two bewildered cowboys to follow on foot.

Arrived, they found the doors barred against them. The Reverend Beazley, it seemed, had made certain impassioned remarks about ruffians, with all of which Samantha Prosser heartily concurred.

Hurt and baffled, the pair squatted on the edge of the watering trough. Laughing guests streamed by them into the house, dishes rattled, a fiddle squeaked. They ignored it all while the acid of resentment gnawed at their souls.

For ten years they had shared Handlebar's every trouble and every joy. And now, on his wedding night, they had been cast aside. Frozen they sat, unable even to speak.

Presently Sid appeared through the dusk and joined them. He hiccoughed faintly, and a cautious deliberation

was visible in the manner in which he placed his feet.

"I had to," Sid said. "This has been an awful day. I—"

He broke off. The door had opened. A man emerged, peered about in the moonlight, and softly called their names. The voice was Handlebar's, but the figure was not. The light streaming behind him revealed lemon-yellow gloves and, even more incredible, a swallow-tailed coat that hung like a sack on his scrawny shoullders.

"You see?" Sid said hollowly.

Hank spotted them. Hitching up his pants legs, he stumbled forward through the dust. Suddenly Antonio gave a cry and stared at Hank's lip. Handlebar's mustache was gone!

"*Madre de Dios!*" Antonio whispered. "He has been dehorn'!"

Handlebar hung his head. He looked naked—probably he felt naked.

"Valentine didn't like 'em," he mumbled.

Humiliated for him, Boxcar changed the subject.

"Where did you get that monkey suit?" he asked.

"It belonged to Valentine's first husband. He was a faro dealer."

"Must of been a big man."

"Never mind that," Hank growled. He thrust his hands into his pockets, took them out, and said apologetically, "What I come for was to tell you—Well, you mustn't mind Valentine's seeming snippy. She's excited. This marrying business makes a woman fluttery-like."

"Soon as the knot's tied and she quiets down, I'll sneak you into the party by the back door," Hank went on. "So hang around till then."

HE GRINNED hopefully, trying to assuage their hurt, and scuttled away. Boxcar took off his hat and swore a tremendous oath.

"The back door! I'll be damned!"

"Perhaps," Antonio said glumly, "eet ees time we should go."

They went to the corral, but when they were in their saddles, a curious immobility gripped them. Sid gave his head a mournful shake.

[*Turn page*]

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"I hate to ride off without giving Hank some kind of salute."

Antonio fingered his revolver. "Maybe," he suggested, "we could blast zings up as we leave."

"Old stuff," Sid complained. "Hank deserves something special, like—" He snapped his fingers. "The General! It's in the lean-to where Hank's been bunking."

He leaped to the ground, staggered, caught himself, and disappeared. In a moment he was back, carrying the huge shotgun, a horn of powder, and several ancient issues of the *Rocky Mountain News*.

Feverishly they loaded the General with powder enough to choke a bull, hesitated, added another charge for good measure, and wadded the monster load tight with the *News*. Sid crept to a side window and peered into the house. The merrymaking had quieted, and he soon discovered why.

"They're standing up to the preacher," he reported. "Hank's looking a mite green. We timed it just right." He handed the ponderous gun to Boxcar. "You're the biggest. Tip 'er off!"

Boxcar drew a deep breath. The others got behind and braced. Elevating the massive barrel toward the moon, Boxcar Kelley shut his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

The General shattered the night like the crack of doom. Boxcar reeled into the arms of his compañeros and knocked them flat. The vast concussion blew out the window pane and set thunderous echoes pealing through the hills. Horses bolted, dogs howled—out in the brush half a tribe of inquisitive Indians fled for their lives.

Boxcar heaved to his feet and groaned like a stunned ox. Antonio beat the heel of his palm against his deafened ear, while Sid eyed the blizzard of newspaper scraps that fluttered earthward like snow.

Inside the house the dumbfounded guests recovered their voices. Women screamed, men shouted, and footsteps pounded for the door. Suddenly Antonio's fingers dug into Sid's arm.

"El General!" he wailed.

They stared in horror. The mammoth charge had split the barrel asun-

der, and the gun lay ignominiously in the dirt, its frayed mouth gaping in silent reproach.

"Let's make tracks!" Boxcar said hoarsely.

It was too late. Their horses had stampeded, and Samantha Prosser, reckless of her bridal finery, was storming around the corner of the house. Hard at her heels came Handlebar Hank and a swarm of guests. Spying the General, she uttered a piercing shriek.

"You fools!" Furiously she swept up the gun and shook it in their pallid faces. "You drunken fools! Look what you've done to my gun!"

Handlebar braked to a halt.

"Whose gun?" he said as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Madam, whose gun?"

"My gun!" she repeated wildly. Her cheeks were mottled with passion. "I was going to hang it over the fireplace and name the house the General's Gun. Nothing else like it anywhere! A gold mine! People coming from all over the state to see my gun. And now— Oh, you fools! May lightning strike you dead!"

"So!" Hank said in a thin, small voice. His head thrust forward on his neck, and he rocked coldly back and forth on his heels. "You were marrying the General, not me!"

BELATEDLY Mrs. Prosser realized her mistake. She paled and fell back.

"Now, Henry—" she murmured.

His hand darted out, jerked the wounded gun from her grasp, and cuddled it to the protection of his breast. His lip quivered with indignation.

"Now, Henry—" Mrs. Prosser said again.

He glared over her head at the wall of the boarding house. "The General's Gun!" he croaked with a gulp, and his stricken eyes swept over the circle of gape-mouthed guests. A tremor ran through him. "Wedding, my eye! It's nothing but an advertisement for a hash house!"

"Henry!"

[*Turn page*]

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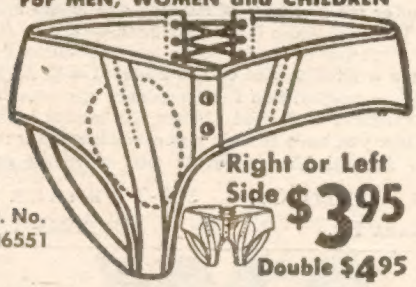

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"Pah!" said Handlebar Hank.

With monumental dignity he stalked away into the night. His three companions fell in beside him, but as darkness closed about them, reaction caught Handlebar, and his chin sank upon the General. A sound suspiciously like a sniffle came from his nose.

"Don't take it so hard," Sid consoled. "The breech works, and the writing from President Grant ain't damaged none. We can get a new barr'l."

"*Si,*" Antonio added. "An ze *mustachios,* zey will grow again."

Dumbly Handlebar shook his head. His comrades looked at each other in despair. Then Boxcar Kelley's face lighted.

"There's some Old Gurkenheimer down in the willows!" he cried.

"There is?" Handlebar looked up.

"Why, sure!"

"Then what're we waiting for?"

Arm in arm they hurried through the moonlight, the tails of Hank's coat rustling a soft song of freedom across the sagebrush.

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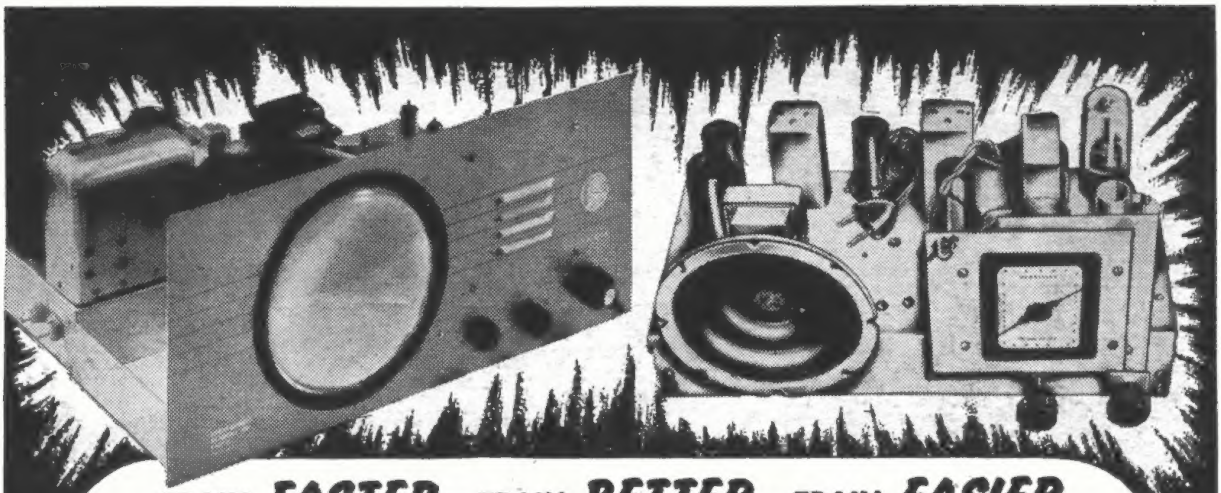

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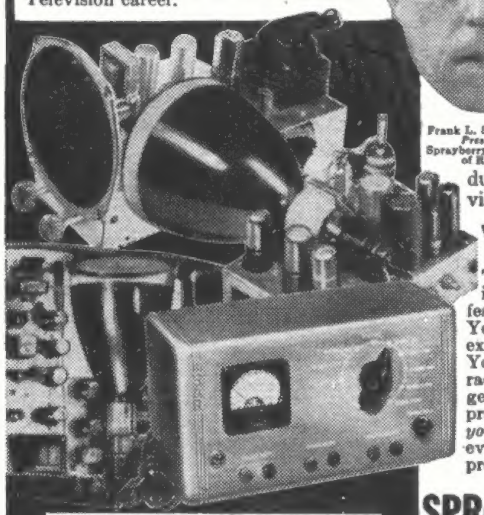

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